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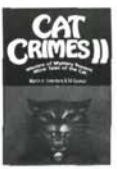

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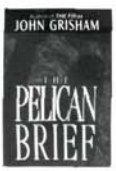

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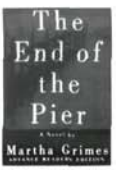

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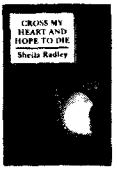

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On our cover is
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(see page 283)

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

1991's EQMM *Readers Award winner, Peter Lovesey, is the author of eighteen novels, including the historical series featuring Sergeant Cribb, a Victorian sleuth whose further adventures were chronicled in a television series shown in the U.S. on PBS's* Mystery. *The author is also adept at capturing the social milieu of our own day, as we can see in this story of a group of school children with a summer vacation before them and a restless need for adventure . . .*

THE MAN WHO ATE PEOPLE

by PETER LOVESEY

No one knew the girl. She turned up at the rec one Friday morning in the summer holiday when the hard lads from Class 5 were doing nothing except keeping the younger kids from using the swings. Gary and Clive were taking turns at smoking a cigarette. Podge Mahoney was trying to mend a faulty wheel on his skateboard. Daley Hughes and his brother Morgan were on the swings—not using them in the conventional way, which would have been soft, but twisting them so that the chains entwined. The rest of the bunch, including Mitch—by common consent the most mature—lounged on the grass talking about the bikes they wanted to possess.

None of the girls from Class 5 ventured anywhere near. This incautious miss strolled up to the unoccupied swing, backed against it to push off and started swinging, her eyes focussed far ahead, excluding the lads from her vision. Thin, pale-skinned, with a straw-coloured ponytail, she was in black jeans and a white T-shirt.

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Several heads turned towards Mitch for a lead. Mitch possessed the coveted first floss of a moustache and he generally spoke for all of them if required. He leaned back on his elbows and said, "Someone wants a swing. Give 'em some help."

Paul, the boy Mitch had addressed, said, "Come on," to Clive. The pair got behind the girl on the swing, waited for it to come to them, tucked their fingers over the seat and heaved it forward. When it had soared high and swung back, they gave it another push, straining high to catch it at the peak. The rest of the lads chorused support with a rising "Wooooo!"

Against expectations, the girl didn't scream. Indeed, as the swing soared to the high point of its arc, almost level with the crossbar, she brought her knees up to her chest to secure a footing. Then she braced and stood upright—an acrobatic feat that few, if any, of the watchers would have essayed.

The ironwork groaned. Paul and Clive stepped out of range, for the girl was imparting her own momentum to the swing, hoisting it still higher by getting leverage bending her knees and virtually kicking the seat upwards. She looked capable of going right over the top. She was fearless. The mocking chorus had already died in the throats of the watchers. The girl kept the display going for long enough to demonstrate that she was doing it from choice. When at length she signalled the end of the ride by straightening on the swing, making herself a dead weight, there was an awed silence. After the swing was still again, she remained standing on the seat, arms folded, only her left shoulder lodged against the chain to keep her balanced.

"What's your name?" Podge Mahoney asked. He'd given up fiddling with his skateboard.

"Danny."

"That's a boy's name."

"Danielle." She made it sound like Daniel.

"What school?"

"Grantley."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a private boarding school."

Roger, who was a good mimic, repeated the statement in the accent of the private boarding school.

The girl was undeterred. "What are your plans for today? What are you going to do?"

"Nothing much," said Podge.

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"That's our business," Mitch said, sensing that the girl was trying to gatecrash.

"Mind if I join in?" Danny asked.

"Course we mind," said Mitch. "Piss off."

"I can get cigarettes."

"Fags?" said Clive. "You can get fags?"

"We wouldn't take bribes," said Mitch, and several faces fell.

"What are you, a gang, or something?"

"No," said Mitch, who was known, and respected, for the honesty of his statements.

"I want to join."

"Don't be so dumb."

Clive added, "Find some girls to play with."

She shifted her position on the swing just a fraction and braced her legs, imparting a shudder to the structure. "Who's going to make me?"

No one answered. Podge walked across to his skateboard and started taking an interest in the wheels again.

She was a scrap of a girl really, but her manner unsettled everyone. She said in her elegant voice, "Anyway, you look like a gang to me. If you were a gang, what would one have to do to join?"

All eyes turned in Mitch's direction. No one else was capable of answering such a hypothetical question. Until now, nobody had thought of the group as a gang. They were just the kids from Class 5, obliged to hang about the rec until they thought of something better to do. At the end of the summer they would go to secondary schools and be dispersed among a number of classes that would be called "forms." For these few remaining weeks they clung to the familiar.

Mitch pondered the possible entrance requirements of the hypothetical gang. He was sure it wouldn't be enough to say that girls were excluded. This one was unlikely to accept the logic that she was different.

He had to think of something she wouldn't contest. At length he said, "If we were a gang, which we aren't, I'd make a rule that anyone who joined had to show their thing."

The rest didn't share his seriousness. There were cackles of amusement. Morgan said, "Girls haven't got things."

"Shut up, toerag."

The laughter stopped, quelled by the force of Mitch's putdown. Nobody wanted to catch his eye.

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The girl Danny said, "If I do, am I in?"

Mitch was finding it difficult to cope with her erratic reasoning. Clinging doggedly to reality, he said, "It isn't a question of being in or out. We don't have a gang, okay?"

"Anyway," added Clive to the girl, "you wouldn't dare."

Nobody anticipated that she would take them up on the dare at once, in broad daylight, in the rec, in full view of any grownups who happened to be passing. She unfastened the top button of her jeans and called across to Mitch, "You won't see from over there."

She proposed to display herself standing on the swing. For a moment everyone held back in awe. Then Podge Mahoney took a step closer. It was the signal for a general advance. Daley and Morgan disentangled themselves from the other swings. A half-circle formed in front of the girl. Mitch, on his dignity, had to decide how to react. The others had left no doubt of their commitment. If he missed this, he'd be like the kid sent early to bed the night they showed *Jaws* on TV. He was the last to his feet, but nobody noticed, or cared. The girl Danny had turned an intended humiliation into a show of power.

She gripped the front of her jeans and said, "Ready?"

A couple of heads nodded, but no one spoke.

In a slick movement she slid jeans and knickers down a short way. Most of 5A had been initiated into *la différence* at some time in their lives; none so publicly, nor with such nonchalance.

"All right," she said as she drew the jeans up again, "someone else's turn." She pointed to Mitch. "Yours."

The tension broke to howls of laughter, gleeful at Mitch's discomfiture and relieved that Danny hadn't pointed to anyone else.

"On the swing, Mitch!"

Mitch glared at Clive, who had made the remark. Of all the lads, Clive was the one he would have counted on to support him. How could loyalty be so brittle? "Shut up! Shut up, the lot of you!"

They didn't shut up, so he had to continue to shout to be heard. "This ain't a bloody game. It was to see if she could join some gang, but there ain't a gang, is there?"

Someone said, "Chicken."

Someone else said, "Get 'em off."

It only wanted someone to shout, "Debag him!" and they would be on him like wolves.

Then Danny the girl, still aloft on the swing, spoke up. "Mitch is right. There isn't a gang, but if there was, I'd be in. Who's going to give me another swing?"

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Shouts of, "Me!" sprang up all round her.

Mitch's dignity was preserved. His authority was in tatters, and he couldn't think where he had made his mistake.

In the week that followed, Danny dispelled the summer boredom with marvellous suggestions. She knew a way into the dump where the scrapped cars were heaped high. It was her idea to cross the railway lines and build a camp on the embankment out of old sleepers and slabs of turf someone had left there. She turned the multi-storey car park into a Cresta Run, using supermarket trolleys as sledges. When they were told by the attendant to stop, she negotiated a fee of twelve pounds with the fete secretary for pushing leaflets under the wipers of cars. The experience unified the group as never before. They actually were becoming a gang.

Yet Danny's influence was discreetly managed. She made no overt bid for the leadership; rather, she made a show of deferring to Mitch, seeking his approval. She would let him distribute the cigarettes she brought with her most mornings. Sometimes she let Mitch carry the day with his own suggestions. Unfortunately, when the daily cry of "What shall we do?" went up, Mitch could never think of anything they hadn't done before, so there were days when they played football or went fishing complaining that it was a drag.

He knew he ought to do better. His lack of originality depressed him. He lost sleep trying to think of new challenges. In the bleakness of the night, all he could see in his mind's eye were the faces of Class 5, mouths downturned, eyes glazed in boredom. It wasn't as if they lived by the sea, or in the country, where adventures were to be had. No circuses ever came through their suburban town. No pop concerts. No marathons. Not even Billy Graham.

The idea, when it came, almost escaped Mitch. Like a butterfly it fluttered within range and eluded his grasp. He captured it clumsily at the third attempt.

Over breakfast one Monday, submerged in gloom at the prospect of another meeting in the rec, he failed to hear his father the first time.

"Wake up, lad."

"Wha'?"

"I was saying that somebody slipped a leaflet about the fete under my windscreen wiper—in my own garage."

Mitch did his best to produce a sunny smile. "That was me, Dad. I had a few left over. Me and some of the kids—"

"Some of my friends and I."

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"We were going round the car park Saturday."

Mr. Mitchell's eyebrows bobbed up. "Helping the church fete committee? Making yourselves useful for a change? Whose idea was that—yours?"

"Em, one of the others, I think."

"Never mind. I like it. I won't be going to the fete myself, but I approve the spirit of the venture." Mr. Mitchell had long nursed an ambition to see his son as a boy scout, but Mitch, with a distaste for uniforms, had refused to join.

"Why aren't you going, Dad?"

"On principle, son. I don't approve of a certain gentleman they've invited to open it."

"Sam Coldharbour?" Mitch was stunned. He had long been convinced that his father revered people who achieved things. Sam Coldharbour had climbed Everest and walked across America. He had boxed for Britain in the Olympics. He was the most famous person for miles around. Moreover, the Mitchells hadn't missed a fete in Mitch's lifetime. Mitch's father had twice been chairman of the committee. "Don't you like him, Dad?"

"It isn't a question of like or dislike. I don't know the man personally. It's just that I'm unwilling to shake the hand of a man who behaves as he does."

"Now, Frank," said Mitch's mother in the voice she used to stop conversations that threatened to offend.

"What does he do?" asked Mitch.

"Not over breakfast," said Mitch's mother.

"The man may be a hero to some, but he isn't to me," Mitch's father insisted on saying, more to Mrs. Mitchell than the boy. "He isn't even discreet with his philandering."

"What's philandering, Dad?"

"It's misconduct."

"Frank, please!"

"But it's true. The man preys on women—ladies, I mean."

"Prays—like in church?"

"No, you stupid boy. I used the word 'prey' in the sense of hunting."

"Hunting—like a tiger?"

"A wolf, if you ask me."

"Frank!"

At the rec an hour or so later, Mitch related to an enthralled audience what he had learned about Sam Coldharbour, the man chosen to open the church fete. "My dad calls him a wolf."

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"A werewolf?" said Roger, eyes popping.

"I said a wolf. He goes philandering. Any of you lot heard of philandering before? No? I thought not. Well, I'll have to tell you, won't I? It's hunting ladies. Mr. Coldharbour goes around hunting ladies."

There was a thoughtful silence.

"What does he do if he catches one?" Podge asked.

There was some coarse laughter. Class 5 knew what men and women were supposed to do together.

"You're wrong," said Mitch, with his regard for the literal truth. "What do wolves do if they catch people?"

"Kill them?" said Clive, after a pause. Class 5 also knew a lot about horror and fantasy.

"Eat them?" said Daley.

Mitch opened his hands in a gesture that seemed to say there was no accounting for the things grownups got up to.

Morgan pulled a face and said, "Ugh."

"I don't believe it," said Danny. "People don't eat each other in Worcester Park."

Mitch rose to the challenge he had anticipated ever since Danny had gatecrashed. "Why not?" he demanded. "He didn't always live here."

"He'd have to be a cannibal, and you can see he isn't," said Danny. "How many of you lot have seen Mr. Coldharbour?"

Half a dozen hands were hoisted.

"Well, then," she said, as if the matter were settled. She walked to the swing and gave it a push.

Mitch was about to defend his assertion by claiming that anything his dad said was the truth when he thought of a better riposte. "He's travelled all over the world, Sam Coldharbour has. He's been up in the mountains and through jungles and on desert islands. He must have met some cannibals on one of his expeditions. If a cannibal asks you to come to a feast, you don't say no. That's how it started, I reckon."

"You reckon?" said Podge.

"Yes," said Mitch with decision. "I reckon. He joined in a cannibal feast."

Clive came to his aid. "And then he got a taste for it. Once you've tasted human flesh, everything else tastes like old socks."

"Podge's socks," said Roger, and everyone laughed, including Podge. They needed to laugh.

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Boys of that age are not fastidious about much, and they'll talk about anything. They argued lustily whether cannibalism could be justified for survival, but it was clear that whatever they claimed to the contrary, few, if any, cared to think of it close to home.

Danny the girl listened, contributing nothing else. She waited for the arguments to run their course and then said, "Isn't it time we decided what to do?"

Mitch proposed cops and robbers and everyone groaned.

That evening Mitch heard his father on the phone talking about the fete. Someone from the committee was evidently trying to get him to reconsider his decision to stay away, but he was adamant. "I don't need telling Coldharbour's fame will increase the attendance no end, but I have my principles, Reggie. I don't approve of the fellow. I don't care for the way he conducts his life. . . . The women are what I'm talking about, and what he gets up to at that disagreeable house of his in Almond Avenue. . . . All right, I may be behind the times, but I try to lead a decent life. I've seen Coldharbour in action. I was at the tennis club dance last autumn when he was supposed to be partnering Hettie Herzog. He got a sight of that pretty little girl who works in the cake shop—Linda? Belinda?—something like that. She's married to the chap who runs the bar. He cut Hettie stone dead and started nuzzling Linda in front of her husband. I didn't enquire what happened later, but I've a pretty good idea. What could the husband do? Coldharbour boxed for England. He's had four different women since then, to my certain knowledge. Married or single, they're all meat and drink to Sam Coldharbour. No, I don't wish to meet him. I don't wish to go within a mile of the man."

Mitch listened with fascination that turned to awe. If there had been any doubt before of the news he had conveyed to Class 5—and he *had* rather overstated his confidence—such doubt had just been removed. Four women . . . all meat and drink to Sam Coldharbour.

The next morning found Mitch in Almond Avenue staring through the railings at Coldharbour's house, a modern construction with flat roofs and arched windows distinctly out of keeping with the mock-Tudor 1930s houses on either side. The grounds were spacious enough for a tennis court and a good-sized swimming pool, with diving board. While Mitch was staring in, thinking about the owner, he had his idea.

He came straight to the point when the gang assembled at the usual place. "You know what Clive said about eating people?" Since

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nobody appeared to remember, he said, "Once you get a taste for it, you can't stop. It's like drugs. Sam Coldharbour's had five women this year."

"*Eaten* them?" piped Roger in horror.

"My dad says they're meat and drink to him, married or not."

"Who said?" asked Danny the girl. It took a lot to alarm her, but there was a gratifying glint of concern in her eyes.

"I told you. My old man."

Danny said nothing else and no one questioned the statement. After all, Mitch was always so scrupulous about the truth.

"I've thought of a brill dare," Mitch went on. "On Saturday, when old Coldharbour opens the fete, he isn't going to be at home for an hour or so, is he? Well, who's coming for a swim in the cannibal's pool?"

He might, perhaps, have phrased it more invitingly.

"Can't swim," said Podge.

"Just a dip in the shallow end, then."

"I'm going to the fete with my mum," said Paul.

"Chicken."

"It's a great dare," said Clive with more craft. "If all of us do it, I'm in."

"I got athlete's foot," said Morgan. "I'm supposed to keep it dry."

It was Danny who swung the decision by simply saying, "I'll be there, Mitch."

Seven others were shamed into enlisting.

The fete organizers were rewarded with brilliant sunshine on Saturday. From behind a builder's skip in Almond Avenue at 1:55 P.M., eight of the would-be bathers watched Sam Coldharbour drive out between the stone pillars of number eleven in his BMW.

"All right, who's coming?" Mitch challenged the others.

Podge said, "Danny ain't here yet."

"She must have chickened out," Clive said. He gave Mitch a supportive smile. "What do you expect from a girl? We can't wait for her."

Mitch led them in, sprinting full pelt up the drive and across a stretch of lawn to the green-tiled surround of the pool. Lattice patterns of sunlight made the water look specially inviting. Mitch stripped completely, ran to the diving board and took a header in. Clive followed. Some of the boys had prudently put on swimming trunks under their clothes, but no one wanted to risk derision, so everything came off. Immersion made them feel secure. Soon they

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were shouting and splashing each other as if it were the town pool.

At some point Mitch came up from a dive and saw Danny standing by the edge. She was dressed as if for church, in blouse, skirt, socks and shoes. Her hair was in bunches tied with white ribbon. He grabbed Clive's arm and pointed. Clive wasn't going to miss an opening like this. He called out derisively to the others, "Look who's finally turned up."

"My mother made me go to the fete," Danny explained. "I only just got away."

"Coming in?" Mitch called out.

"There isn't time."

"Course there's time."

"There isn't. He'll be back soon. When I left, he was walking round the stalls, but it won't take him long to get round. You'd better get out."

They hesitated, each boy swivelling his head to see if one of the others was willing to climb out first. Truth to tell, the hard lads of Class 5 had turned coy. Their naked state in front of the girl—the girl with no inhibitions about her own body—was a more immediate concern than being caught and eaten by Sam Coldharbour.

She said, "I think I can hear the car." She turned to look along the drive.

There was turmoil in the water. Modesty abandoned, everyone struck out for the side. Lily-white bottoms were everywhere exposed, bent over the tiled edges of the pool in the scramble to get out.

"It's him!" Danny shouted.

To shrieks of alarm, the bathing party broke up. No one had time to put on clothes. They grabbed their things and scampered across the grass, dropping garments as they fled.

A squeal of brakes from Sam Coldharbour's BMW added to the panic. The car skidded and stopped, raising dust. Coldharbour leapt out and sprinted after someone. Mitch saw enough to convince himself that it would be suicidal to try to get through the gate, so he made for the railings some way down. He flung his clothes over, grabbed the top and hauled himself up. He perched up there a moment before leaping to the pavement. The sense of relief at getting out was so overwhelming that it took him a second or two to realise that he was standing naked in a suburban street. He went behind a tree and struggled into his clothes. He was a sock short, but he didn't care.

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Further along Almond Avenue, Podge had made a similar escape. He'd left both shoes in the garden.

Daley and Morgan came running from the other direction. "Anyone get caught?" Morgan asked.

"Don't know," Mitch admitted. "Let's go back to the rec. That's where we'll meet."

"If he *did* catch anyone—" Podge started to say.

"Your shirt's inside out," Mitch interposed.

Members of the bathing party arrived at the swings at intervals and told of narrow escapes and grazed flesh and missing garments. Clive insisted that he'd been thrown to the ground by old Coldharbour and only got away because he was still wet and too slippery to hold. Nobody placed much reliance on things Clive said.

Roger had gone straight home feeling sick, but all eight of the bathers were accounted for.

"What about Danny?" Mitch said. "Did anyone see Danny get out?"

"He was chasing her," said Podge. "I saw the cannibal chasing her."

"She's an ace runner," said Clive. "She'll turn up soon."

His optimism wasn't justified. The shadow of the swing lengthened and faded in the dusk and Danny didn't come.

"She must have gone straight home," Clive said eventually.

"We ought to make sure," said Podge.

"How can we, you fat git?" Mitch rounded on him. "We don't know where she lives."

"We ought to tell the police or something."

"If she doesn't come home, her mum will report it."

Mitch's faith in grown-ups prevailed. It was conceded that nothing could be done and they dispersed, after vowing to assemble again at the same place next day. "And I bet she turns up as usual," said Clive.

In reality, Mitch had a horrid conviction that Clive was mistaken. Danny would not turn up, and he was responsible for the adventure that had gone so tragically wrong. In bed that night, he struggled to reassure himself that somehow his father must have been misinformed and cannibalism had not broken out in suburban Worcester Park. No one could get away with it, even if they were so ghoulish as to try. But the fears returned at intervals through the night.

In the morning everyone except Danny turned up at the rec. The optimists among them said they should wait. Clive wanted to go to the police right away.

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"No," said Podge. "They don't believe kids like us. We'll get done for trespassing, and it'll get in the papers, and our new schools will know about it."

"What are we going to do, then?" said Clive. "We can't just forget about Danny. She's in the gang."

"It was never a gang," said Mitch.

"Was."

"Wasn't."

"Was."

"While you're arguing," said Clive, "Danny might still be alive. She could be killed any minute."

Mitch may have been short of original ideas, but he was sharp enough to tell when his leadership was under threat. This was a moment for action. "We're going back to the house."

"What?"

"We're going to get Danny out. If we stick together, there's enough of us to take on anyone, even old Coldharbour. Strength in numbers, right?" He held a fist aloft.

"Right," said Clive, raising a fist.

"Right," said the others with less animation.

For mutual encouragement, they marched like a platoon to Almond Avenue, swinging their arms high and trying to stay in step. At the railings of Sam Coldharbour's house they halted.

"Look," said Morgan.

Anyone cherishing the hope that the man who ate people might have slipped out for an hour, to church, or the paper shop, or to walk the dog, must have felt a draining of enthusiasm at the sight of the prominently muscled figure reclining beside the swimming pool on a sunlounger.

Mitch, however, was equal to the challenge. He believed that they were capable of rescuing Danny if she was still alive. And he did accept responsibility for what had happened to her. This was the right way, the man's way, to put things right. He felt like a leader now.

He explained how they would take care of Sam Coldharbour.

They climbed over the railings at the place where the foliage was thickest and crept like Indians around the perimeter, using the shrubs as cover, and staying close to the railings. The reclining figure continued to recline. No one else was in the vicinity of the pool.

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A toolshed stood close to the railings near a kitchen garden, and this was where they headed first. Their luck was in. It was unlocked, and there was room for everyone inside. Better still, the shed was well-equipped. The boys started arming themselves with garden tools. Roger had a large wooden mallet. Morgan and Daley started to wrestle for possession of a scythe.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mitch said in a voice that shamed them all. "Put those things down. We don't want to get in a fight."

"We might," said Podge. "We need to arm ourselves."

"Bollocks," said Mitch. "We need both hands free. Our weapon is surprise."

So it was that in a moment the Class 5 assault team emerged from the toolshed armed with nothing more lethal than several lengths of rope and a narrow-mesh net, of the sort used for keeping birds off red-currant bushes. This was the most dangerous stage of the operation, for they had to cross an open stretch of lawn.

Mitch led the advance, his eyes fixed on the recumbent figure of Sam Coldharbour. The eight small boys moved stealthily but rapidly towards the ex-Olympian, who still didn't stir. His eyes opened only when Mitch was so close that he blotted out the sun.

This was Mitch's first close sight of the cannibal's face, and it was not so frightening as it had been in his mind's eye. The teeth were not the vampire fangs he had pictured and the eyes weren't, after all, narrow slits edged with red. Close up, Sam Coldharbour was unremarkable, the more so when an oily rag was spread over his face and the net thrown across the entire length of his body and held down by six boys, while two others passed ropes around to secure him to the frame of the sunlounger. Morgan, who was strong in the arm and good at knots, drew the ends of the ropes tightly together and fastened them. Sam Coldharbour was efficiently trussed, his protests muffled by the rag. It had all been done so rapidly that Mitch doubted if any of them had been recognized.

"Leave him," he ordered. "We're going into the house."

With a perceptible swagger, he led his commandos across the patio and up to the house. The patio door was slightly open. It squeaked as he pushed it aside. He had never been inside a house so modern looking, or so large. There was steel and leather and stripped pine and huge plants in white containers. "You three take the downstairs," he told Clive, Daley, and Roger. "We'll try the bedrooms.

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And remember," he said in an afterthought to Clive, "to look in the freezer."

The house was silent except for their footsteps on the spiral staircase, which was made of wrought iron, painted white. With a silent prayer that they would find Danny still alive, Mitch progressed to the landing and opened the first door. The room was some sort of office, with maps on the walls. He tried the next. A bathroom. Then discovered a bedroom with a single bed, a featureless room devoid of anything notable except what Podge noticed—a pair of blue and white trainers half hidden under the bed.

"Those are Danny's."

"She's here, then," said Mitch.

"She was," said Podge in a low voice.

Mitch shuddered. "We'll try the other rooms."

Two more unoccupied bedrooms.

The last door on their left was ajar. Mitch pushed it open, and stood staring. The room contained a huge circular bed, out of keeping with the other furnishings, which in Mitch's opinion were silly for a bedroom—a glass-fronted cocktail cabinet, a fridge, a music centre, pink-tinted mirrors the length of two of the walls. When his gaze travelled upwards, he saw that another vast, pink mirror was attached to the ceiling.

It was in the reflection on the ceiling that Mitch noticed something stir in the untidy heap of bedclothes. "Someone's there!" he told Podge. "Come on."

He approached the bed, with Podge observing a judicious step behind him. For a worrying second or two Mitch wondered if he was in error. The bedclothes were quite still.

Then they were flung aside and a red-haired woman sat up and shouted, "What in the name of Satan . . . ?"

The words didn't trouble Mitch so much as the sight of her rearing up from the bed, not unlike a ship's figurehead he had once seen in a maritime museum. She was bare-breasted and gave every appearance of being carved out of oak and painted bright pink with dabs of crimson on the points of her chest. No doubt the effect was partly due to the light from the mirrors and partly to Mitch's immaturity. Female torsos in general had yet to persuade him that they were anything but grotesque.

Without even covering herself, the woman demanded, "Just what do you think you're doing in here?"

"Looking for someone," answered Podge, over Mitch's shoulder.

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Mitch found his voice. "Our friend Danny."

She said, "Danny? You're friends of Danny? Bloody liberty—I'll have her guts for garters. Get out, the lot of you. Out!"

He heard the others act on the order. Before going after them, he stood his ground long enough to say, "You want to watch out. It could be you next." Far from being grateful for the advice, the woman gave signs of rolling out of bed in pursuit. That was too much for Mitch. He fled.

Downstairs, Clive was waiting for the others. "She ain't here," they said in chorus, and Clive added, "We're too late."

"Did you look in the freezer?"

"It's stacked to the top with peas and things from Sainsbury's. We couldn't move all the stuff."

From the bedroom upstairs the woman shouted, "I'll call the police."

"We've got to get out," said Podge. "There's nothing we can do, Mitch."

"Danny must be dead by now," said Clive. "If the police come, they'll find out."

"That lady upstairs won't call them," Mitch said, trying to calm his troops. "She's in it. She knew about Danny. Is there anywhere we haven't looked—a cellar, or a garage?" He knew as he spoke that any gang leader worthy of the name would have said something more positive.

Morgan said, "I don't bloody care. I'm off."

"Me, too," said his brother Daley. "Who's coming?"

Not everyone was so frank. One or two muttered inaudible things before they followed Morgan out.

"Wimps!" Mitch called after them.

If the slur was heard, it was not heeded. The "gang," all of it, including Clive, deserted. Mitch stepped out to the patio and watched his friends in flight, the seven he would have claimed as his closest mates, haring along the drive towards Almond Avenue. He knew for certain that his authority, his credibility as leader, was gone forever. They were the quitters, yet he would be blamed.

He still felt driven to find out what had happened to Danny. He was about to go around the side of the house in search of a cellar when he became conscious of something that shouldn't be. Some part of his brain was functioning independently, trying to convey information, an observation. He stared about him uncertainly.

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Then he realised what was amiss: the swimming pool was deserted. Sam Coldharbour was no longer beside it, tied to the sunlounger. The sunlounger itself was gone.

If Coldharbour was free, danger was imminent.

He heard a sound close by, and swung around. It wasn't Sam Coldharbour standing behind him, and it wasn't the woman from upstairs. It was Danny.

She was in shorts and a T-shirt, and was barefoot. She said solemnly, "Thanks, Mitch."

"We thought you were dead," he said in a whisper. His real voice wouldn't function. "Come on, let's run for it!"

She said in her flat, unexcited way, "There's no need to run."

"He'll get us."

"He won't."

"There's a woman as well."

"She's my mother," said Danny, then added, "I know what you're thinking and you're right. Your dad was right, too. She's another stupid woman who got tricked by Sam Coldharbour. He told her she was adorable, and stuff like that. She moved in here four weeks ago. School had broken up and I had nowhere else to go."

"You mean you lived here all this time?"

"Stayed here."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"I was ashamed."

"When you didn't come out last night, we thought you were caught. Podge saw him chasing you."

"He did. He was in a foul temper. He grabbed my hair and pulled me inside and spanked my bum. *Him!* My mother thought it was a real joke. She locked me in my room for swearing at him. She sided with him." Danny's lips drained of blood as she pressed her mouth shut.

Mitch said, "We thought he was going to kill you and eat you."

"That was dumb." She gave a faint smile. "But I'm glad about what you did."

Mitch shook his head. "We did bugger all except tie him up."

Then Danny surprised him by catching hold of his wrist. "I want to show you something."

Still keeping hold of him, she led him across the patio and over a stretch of lawn to the tiled surround of the pool. She pointed into it.

A breeze was sending ripples across the surface and for a moment Mitch thought the body underneath was struggling. It was not. Sam

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Coldharbour, roped to the lounger, his face still covered by the oily rag, was motionless at the bottom. The water was only a metre or so in depth, but sufficient to have drowned him.

Mitch turned to look at Danny, his eyes huge with the horror of what was down there. "We only tied him up. We didn't do that."

"I know," said Danny.

Mitch glanced down at the smooth surface of the tiled surround and saw how simple it must have been to push the lounger over the edge. He knew what Danny had done, and he knew why. But he stopped himself from speaking prematurely. He turned away from the pool, biting his lip. Finally he said in his usual considered way, "It must have moved because he was wriggling. He wriggled to try and get free and it sort of moved. He couldn't see where it was going. It was an accident."

His eyes glistened. He despised himself, even when Danny squeezed his arm.

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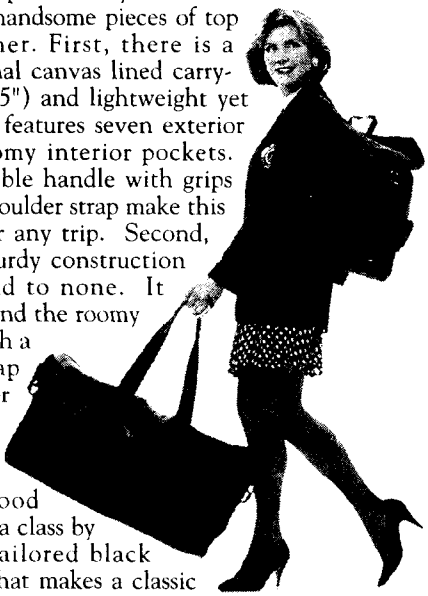

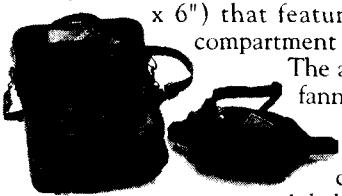

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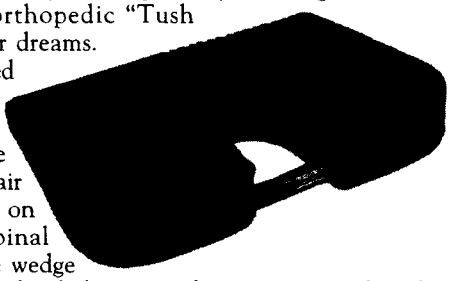

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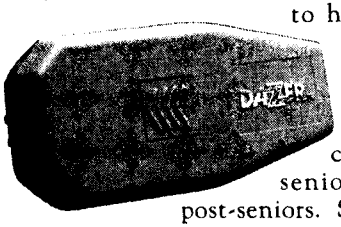

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Whimsical is the word that jumps to mind when I think about Olivia. Whimsical in speech, in attitude, and in the way she dressed . . .

PERIOD OF MOURNING

by DONALD OLSON

I first met Olivia Crackenthorpe when I rented a cottage in Ash Grove in hopes of finishing my novel away from the distractions of the city. One late summer afternoon I heard a voice at my open window, a voice that might easily have been mistaken for the twittering of some timid but excitable bird; going to the door, I found this extraordinary-looking woman holding up a finger wrapped in a soiled white handkerchief. With a trill of jingle-bell laughter she asked if I had any iodine.

"I just wish she would *die*. I know that's a wicked thing to say but it's true, my dear. Every time I come home I say to myself, 'Oh, I do hope she's died while I've been gone.' "

She was referring, it transpired, to her cat Perdita. With a child-like morbid delight she displayed two or three half-healed scratches on her tiny age-spotted hand inflicted by this apparently savage animal. I naturally assumed she had befriended some neighborhood stray. "How long has this cat been with you?" I asked.

"Twelve years."

"Twelve *years?* And it's always been that vicious?"

"Always. Although I have managed to teach her that it's very, very naughty to *bite*. But, Lordy-Lord, those sharp little claws."

When I asked her why she hadn't got rid of the beast, she replied with a forlorn smile that one does have one's duty to family, even to the black sheep members.

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I soon learned all about Olivia. Now in her seventies (from a distance her pert figure and gold-dyed hair were deceptive), she'd lived alone in the red-brick house next door ever since her husband Monty had lost his money in the stock market and taken off for parts unknown.

Whimsical is the word that jumps to mind when I think about Olivia. Whimsical in speech, in attitude, and in the way she dressed. From her long-ago travels she had brought back an exotic collection of colorful accessories: serapes, turbans, sashes, shawls, and mantillas. I would see her leaving her house impeccably attired but flaunting some remarkable Eastern headgear, perhaps a plumed turban or tasseled fez.

Although no longer able to indulge her passion for travel, she liked to pretend to be always on the brink of departure, holding endless consultations with her friends at the travel bureau about fares and tours and itineraries. Then, with a wistful regret, she would look at me over the garden fence and say something like: "I've been obliged to cancel my plans for Egypt. It was to have been the most divine trip down the Nile. I'm quite heartbroken, my dear. Seems there's arisen some tiresome problem with the State Department about my passport. Monty's no help at all. But then he hates for me to fly off and leave him alone."

Now it was here, in regard to Monty, that Olivia's whimsy surpassed oddness and achieved eccentricity. I made this discovery the first time she invited me to tea. I'd wondered why Olivia's manner was so unnaturally subdued until she said, tiptoeing about the room: "Monty's busy in the study. He always reads the financial journals at this time of day."

As I knew Monty Crackenthorpe had flown the coop some twenty years earlier, this news left me somewhat agog. Olivia brought in the tea things: badly tarnished silver and chinaware far from spotless.

A mahogany library table overflowed with a clutter of maps, steamship and airline schedules, guidebooks and colorful brochures.

"I'm planning a little jaunt to the south of France," she revealed in her twittery, jingle-bell voice. "I wanted your advice, my dear. I haven't been there in donkey's years and I'd like to know what to expect. Changes the guidebooks fail to mention."

I was obliged to disappoint her by disclosing I'd never been to the south of France, nor for that matter to any part of that country. She found this astonishing. That I hadn't traveled extensively appeared

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from her expression to cast doubt on my credentials as a writer.

"Oh, what a pity," she exclaimed. "I say, what a lark if we could go together. Traveling companions, you know."

We sipped the tepid tea and nibbled the stale cake while Olivia debated the modes of travel. Steamship was romantic but slow, yet did I think airplanes were quite *safe?* And then presently, with a glance toward the study door, she said: "I do so want Monty to meet you, my dear. I'll just pop in quiet as a mouse and ask him to join us."

I could hear her murmuring beyond the door and then she was back, shaking her head in exasperation. "Poor Monty's in one of his *un*gregarious moods, I fear. The market, you know. It's got him frightfully worried. Oh, well, another time."

Although madly curious, I was required to wait until that weekend for the pleasure of meeting Monty. I was in the garden when I happened to look up and see the figure of a man sitting in a wheelchair in the shade of a catalpa tree on Olivia's lawn. At length Olivia herself appeared wearing black toreador pants and a beaded pink blouse. She signaled me to come over.

As I opened the gate and advanced up the garden path, I was amazed to discover that the wheelchair's occupant was in fact a dummy. It was dressed in a tweed suit, a white shirt, and a broad-striped tie with a fake diamond stickpin. A straw hat was jammed low on its cloth head. It had a rudimentary nose, lips embroidered in red silk thread, and shiny black buttons for eyes.

"Yoo hoo, dear boy," Olivia greeted me. "Come say hello to Monty."

Imagination failed me when I sought for an appropriate reply, so all I said was, "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

Olivia winked at me. "He's been sulking all morning. Something about the Dow Jones. Don't be offended, dear. It's time for our walk but I'm expecting a call from the State Department. I don't suppose *you'd* care to take him."

"Well . . ."

"No, of course you wouldn't. No point in the neighborhood thinking we're *both* dotty."

From this remark and those that followed, I soon discovered Olivia's attitude toward this bizarre doll to be a quite unfathomable mixture of fantasy and common sense. "I know I don't have to worry about *your* opinion, dear. After all, make-believe is your business, true?"

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With a childlike, touching air of trustfulness she imparted the whole story:

"For years after he went away I didn't do a thing about Monty's clothes and personal effects. I suppose I kept hoping he might come back, although I knew he'd mistreated me shamefully. I sometimes think any company is better than none. Well, one day when I got to sorting through all Monty's stuff the idea came to me to make a Monty doll. My dear, it was such *fun*. Stuffing the body and sewing it all up. And so pleasant afterward, having him sitting there with me while I planned my trips, or across the table at mealtimes, and looking after him after he'd had his accident. Tumbled all the way downstairs one night three years ago. Perdita's fault. She scooted between his legs when I was taking him up to bed. Luckily, I still had Mama's wheelchair in the attic. My dear, it's the strangest thing. *My* Monty is ever so much more agreeable than the real man. My Monty never talks back, never complains, never calls me a silly child. He's just *there,* don't you know. Someone to talk to. We go for rides in the car and I push him around the block every afternoon, rain or shine. You would have seen us if that wasn't your writing time."

Her glance fell upon Perdita, glaring down at us from the porch rail. "I'll tell you a secret," Olivia whispered. "I've already started making the sweetest little sawdust kitty that'll look just like Perdita. I'm using parts from an old bearskin rug. If only Perdita would *die.* It'll be ever so lovely, her sitting there just like a proper puss, not scratching and clawing at me every chance she gets."

One would never accuse a child of being insane for liking to dress up in outlandish costumes and play make-believe with her favorite doll. And wasn't Olivia simply a child who in many ways had never made the transition to adulthood? I found it all infinitely sad, yet poignant and touching. Perhaps for the very reason she had adduced: make-believe *was* my business.

The summer wore on. I began making progress on my novel. Tea with Olivia became a daily event. While Perdita gazed menacingly upon us or honed her already lethal claws on the furniture, Olivia would pore over her maps and guidebooks, Monty's benevolent button eyes regarding us with a mute but placid indifference. I was no longer startled when Olivia might suddenly break off and turn to address some remark to Monty, as if aware he was being excluded from the conversation. "What do *you* think, Monty? Do you think the tour might prove too exhausting for me?"

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And then, like the intrusion of the ogre, the monster, or the wicked witch into that fairy-tale summer, the real, the living Monty Crackenthorpe reappeared on the scene, a resurrection devoutly to be regretted by all concerned.

I looked across into Olivia's garden one morning to see a stranger standing on the back porch. I may have imagined a menacing aspect in that narrow crabbed jaw jutting wedgelike beneath a swollen red nose, but I felt an instant alarm. The seedy look of the stranger aroused fears of burglars and break-ins. I decided to investigate.

I introduced myself and asked for Olivia. The man shrugged, eyed me with an insolent frown, then turned back into the house, squalling Olivia's name. "Livy! You got company. Get down here."

At length she appeared, looking like some wasted flower that hadn't been watered in a week. She darted a quick look over her shoulder and came down the steps to join me.

"He's back!" she whispered. "Monty's come home." Drawing me further from the house, she plucked at my sleeve and looked up at me imploringly. "He simply breezed in last night, pleased as punch with himself, as if he'd only gone down to the corner for a pack of cigarettes. He looked frightful. So shabby. He says he's home to stay. My dear, whatever shall I *do?*"

"Kick him out, if that's what you want."

"He won't *go*. He drinks like a fish and says the nastiest things to me. He says I'm cuckoo. He says I should be put away. What on earth am I to do?"

I could see Monty watching us from the window, an ugly smirk on his face, and although I wanted more than anything to offer Olivia some comfort, there was little I could say and nothing I could do. Finally I promised to come to tea that afternoon and at least talk to Monty.

The tea party was not a success. We went through the motions but the real Monty was no more forthcoming than his effigy, which I noticed was nowhere in sight. In the end, he scowled into his teacup and said crossly: "You ought to know better, Livy. Serving tea in dirty cups. Go and wash them properly."

Like a chastened child, Olivia did as she was told. Only then did Monty adopt a more sociable manner.

"Batty as a hoot owl, that one. I'd hoped she might have grown up after all this time. Jeez, she's still playing with dolls."

"You think you've any right to judge *her?*" I replied. "After all, you deserted her."

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He ignored this quibble. "She says you're a writer of some sort. Used to loonies, I suppose."

"I'm very fond of Olivia."

"Well, don't go putting notions in her head. Only one thing to be done, by George, and I'm going to do it. She should have been put away years ago."

"And that's what you plan to do?"

"Sooner the better," he snapped. "I'm her husband. I'll do what's got to be done. Plenty of folks around here will testify what she's like."

"I won't." And with that I got up and left.

For the next several days I saw very little of Olivia and must confess I became too caught up in the final polishing of my novel to take an active interest in what might be happening next door. Until late one morning Olivia burst in upon me, visibly distraught and on the verge of tears.

"I've been dying to talk to you, my dear, but he watches me like a hawk. He's gone to town this morning. I just know he's planning to do something awful. If only I'd had the sense to divorce him. He's going to put me in some sort of—place. Can he do that? Please. Tell me what I should do."

She seemed at that moment more childlike than ever. Clearly, her mind was no match for the appalling Monty's. Nor could I assume responsibility. I wasn't a relative and had known Olivia for only a few months. All I could do was offer meaningless phrases of assurance that things might work out for the best.

I neither saw nor heard from Olivia for a week. She did not appear to water her flowers, though several rainy days intervened to make this unnecessary. And then one afternoon I saw Monty digging a hole under the catalpa tree. He went back inside and came out carrying a burlap bag which he proceeded to bury in the hole. I waited until I saw him drive off in Olivia's ancient De Soto before rushing over.

I found Olivia in tears. "He killed her! Before my very eyes! He brained Perdita with my rolling pin. Said it might as well be used for *something*. Oh, it was dreadful, dreadful. And that's not all. You should have seen what he did to *my* Monty. Literally knocked the stuffings out of him. And he's talking to doctors and lawyers about me. Oh, it's more than I can bear. I wish I could just die."

Suddenly she seized my arm and her voice brightened. "*I* know. We can run away! Yes! Why didn't I think of that before? You'll be

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leaving anyway. We can go together. To the south of France! You can write there and I can have a garden."

As gently and tactfully as possible I tried to explain the impossibility of such a scheme. She gazed at me with childlike stubbornness. "Well, mercy me, *something's* got to be done. We can't let him get away with it. He's a monster! A murderer!"

That she might have possessed the will or strength of purpose to resort to as drastic a solution as she did never entered my mind, and even when she came rushing over to me later that evening and told me what had happened, it did not dawn upon me at the time to disbelieve her story.

"Come quick! Come quick! Monty's had an accident."

A fatal accident, as I soon discovered. Monty lay dead at the foot of the cellar steps. When I tried to question Olivia all she could do was to keep repeating that she'd heard a Godawful crash and found Monty lying down there.

I had to phone the police, of course, and their questions seemed only to confuse Olivia. At least, I thought it was confusion brought on by shock that inspired her to lie, for when they asked her how Monty had happened to fall, she said with a rapid fluttering of her little hands that he'd tripped over something.

"You didn't actually see him fall, Mrs. Crackenthorpe?"

"Well, no, but I *heard* him."

"Then what do you think he tripped on?"

It was then, as she cast a hooded, sly glance in my direction, the glance of a child who has done something inexcusable and suddenly thinks of a way to escape punishment, that I knew Monty's death had been no accident.

"The cat!" she cried out, almost gaily. "He tripped over the cat. The cat ran between his legs at the top of the stairs." She pointed at me. "Ask him. He saw it."

For one ghastly moment I felt sure the officer would demand to see this cat, which Olivia knew perfectly well was dead and buried. It was such a stupid, careless, childish lie.

Before he could speak, I intervened. "That's how it happened, officer. I was here when he fell."

I didn't dare look at Olivia. I prayed she would keep quiet.

"You were here, sir?"

"Olivia had invited me to dinner. Mr. Crackenthorpe was going down to the cellar to fetch a bottle of wine when it happened."

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That's all there was to it. My perjured testimony was all they seemed to require to render a verdict of accidental death.

I accompanied Olivia to the funeral. She held tight to my hand but didn't once shed a tear. I caught one or two of the mourners looking at her with droll amusement. She wore her ancient black dress but at the last minute, while I'd waited in the car, she'd dashed back into the house and added a Spanish mantilla to her outfit. There was no rose in her hair, but with a bunch of sweetpeas pinned to her lapel she looked like an aging, gold-haired Carmen.

That last week before I left we saw a good deal of each other. As if by common agreement, we avoided any reference to the night Monty had died.

"Are you quite sure you'll be all right, Olivia?" I asked her on the day I was to leave.

"Oh, right as rain, my dear. Of course I'll be lonely without Perdita. Lonely but unscarred. And without Monty. *My* Monty. But I can't very well do anything about that when everyone *knows* he's in his grave. They really would think I was dotty."

I asked her if there was anything at all I could do for her before I took off. She started to shake her head and then, with a droll twinkle in her eye and uttering her jingle-bell laugh, she regarded me with a long, measuring look, studying my shoes, my faded jeans, my shirt, and my old tweed jacket with the leather elbow patches.

"If you could spare them, my dear, you might leave me one or two souvenirs. Yes, it would be lovely. I could use the same stuffing and it would be like you'd never left at all. You'd be right here where I could chat with you every day."

I was rather attached to those shoes and to the jacket as well, but I could hardly refuse. And so as a parting gift I presented Olivia with the jeans, the shirt, the jacket and shoes.

"You needn't worry I'll do anything socially indiscreet," she assured me. "One can imagine what the neighbors would say if I were to take in a male lodger so soon after Monty's demise. I think one should observe a decent period of mourning, don't you agree?"

We promised to write to each other, but, life being what it is, we never did. I suppose Olivia felt there was no need to write—it would only confuse the issue. After all, she had only to look across the room and there I'd be, constantly attentive.

Yet even now, years later, I can still see her, that ageless, perennial child-woman, lifting her guileless blue eyes and saying: "Do you think, my dear, that airplanes are quite *safe?*" ●

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a ***NEW*** short story by

BRENDAN DuBOIS

A lifelong resident of New Hampshire, Brendan DuBois has been contributing mystery short stories to magazines and anthologies since 1986. In 1987, "Driven," one of his stories for EQMM, *was nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe award for best short story. Recently Mr. DuBois decided to try his hand at longer fiction; the result is* Dead Sand, *a mystery novel to be published by Pocket Books early next year.*

In this new story, the author takes us to the New Hampshire hills he knows so well, where a visit by a cop "only means trouble" . . .

GRAVE ON A HILL

by BRENDAN DuBOIS

"Did she seem surprised when you called and said we were coming?" Gordon Moore asked from the passenger's side of the cruiser.

Victor Dumont steered onto the gravel driveway, passing a rusted mailbox that said HANSON in black, stick-on letters. "No, not really," he said, easing the car up the driveway. It was a late afternoon in September. It had been misting and threatening rain all day, and the windshield of his cruiser, the only car the police department of Norwich, New Hampshire, owned, had been streaked with oil with each sweep of the wipers.

"She seemed resigned, in a way," he added.

"Doesn't sound good."

"Well, she didn't panic."

Gordon said, "She should've panicked. People up here, cops come visiting, only means trouble."

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"You mean the hill people? I don't believe that garbage."

"Maybe you should, Victor," Gordon said. "You and me and everybody else in a uniform is a valley person. Only time cops come up to the hills is when there's trouble or heads to be busted. The hill people'd rather starve to death than ask us for help. Or advice. Or directions. They're proud and religious and do their own things."

"Maybe she's got nothing to worry about."

"Hmmph." Gordon Moore wore an Anderson-Little topcoat over a grey two-piece suit. His black shoes were covered with black rubber protectors. He looked too well-dressed for this part of New Hampshire, especially with his carefully cut light brown hair and the horn-rimmed glasses that made him look like an investment banker. But Victor had once seen Gordon pick up a two-hundred-pound-plus biker in full leather gear and toss him into the back of a police wagon. And all of that happened in less than a second, it seemed. Gordon hadn't even lost his glasses.

The gravel driveway curved around a small hill and ended in front of a two-story ranch house, with peeling white paint. There was no porch, just a set of concrete steps. A barn was off to the left, unpainted and sagging. A pickup truck was on blocks and a blue Ford Escort with a cracked windshield was parked at the side of the house. A mongrel dog, its brown fur matted and mud-stained, lifted itself up and started to howl, tugging at its chain.

Victor brought the cruiser up to the steps and then halted and reversed direction until a dozen feet separated the vehicle from the house.

"Good planning," Gordon observed.

"Thanks."

The dog continued its half-hearted howling as Victor walked to the steps, Gordon behind him. Just yesterday he'd been looking forward to a quiet weekend with a fishing pole and nothing to disturb him except the possibility of the pager going off. The chance now of a free weekend coming up anytime soon was probably ruined.

He walked up the steps, his orange raincoat flapping in the breeze. His campaign-style police hat with the Chief-Norwich PD pin set in front kept his head dry, and he glanced over at Gordon.

"Going to need your umbrella soon."

"Don't worry about me."

"I'm not. Just worried about your hair."

He took a deep breath and knocked on the door, and it opened instantly. No doubt she had been waiting, ever since seeing the cruiser roll up.

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Victor touched his hand to his cap. "Mrs. Hanson?"

"Yes?" She was in her mid-forties, wearing black polyester slacks and a brown sweater, which had been mended at the elbows. With the open door came the scent of grease and cigarette smoke. Two young girls, one six, the other about eleven, sat on a couch, which was covered by a quilt. The television was on. Mrs. Hanson's black hair, streaked with grey, was pulled back in a simple ponytail with the help of an elastic band. She looked directly at them, her firm face even, showing no expression.

"This here's Detective Moore, of the state police," Victor said, not taking his eyes off her for a second. There was a look about her, especially around the eyes. Was it a look of relief? Or knowledge?

"What's the problem?"

Victor said, "It's about your husband, Henry."

"Henry? He's been gone for five years."

"So he has, Mrs. Hanson. But we've received information that he was the victim of a homicide." From the driveway came the sound of an approaching truck, laboring under low gear.

"Oh." Her hand tugged at the neck of her sweater. "Can't say I'm surprised, really. He was a violent sort. Where's his body? And do you know who done it?"

Victor cleared his throat and reached into his raincoat, pulling out a folded piece of paper. "Mrs. Hanson, this is a search warrant, executed from the Norwich District Court, authorizing Detective Moore and myself to search your property, and the buildings."

The engine sound grew louder, and a bright yellow dump truck came up over the rise, its amber lights flashing into the mist. It was towing a heavy trailer, and set upon the trailer was an equally bright yellow backhoe with large, black tires.

Victor added, almost apologetically, "It seems someone believes you murdered your husband, Mrs. Hanson, and buried him in your front yard."

The dump truck grounded to a halt, its air brakes screeching. Mrs. Hanson said not one word.

Two days before Victor had been in his office, working up the budget for next year's town meeting, when Corinne Grew tapped on his door and walked in. She was the widow of the town's postmaster, and besides being Victor's secretary and file clerk and assistant clerk to the district court, she was also his own private intelligence system for the town of Norwich.

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"Someone here to see you," she said.

"Who'd that be?" he said, putting his pen down. His department was in a small brick building, set next to the Town Hall, and contained four tiny rooms which included his office, a waiting room, storage area, and a holding pen for the few prisoners who had to spend a night before he could bring them to the county jail. The building had belonged to the town's historical society, before one of its members died and left the society $30,000.

"He be one Freddy Hanson. Age about seventeen or so. Said it's real important."

Victor asked, "I know him from anywhere?"

Corinne Grew smiled, adjusted her glasses. "You've pulled him over twice for speeding, once for reckless operation, and you arrested him last year for disorderly conduct, in August when we had all those fights down at the bandstand."

He rubbed at the back of his neck, feeling a knot of muscle and tendon. "Corinne, you ever forget anything?"

"Hardly."

"Send him in, then."

Victor had a few bad habits, and one he was especially aware of was his unceasing impulse to size people up the minute he met them. He knew the pitfalls of this, and he would sometimes think over and over again, "Don't judge a book by its cover," like some sort of mantra, but he couldn't help it.

Freddy Hanson was seventeen, with torn jeans, an open black leather jacket with studs and buckles, and shoulder-length brown hair. His face was reddened with a bad complexion and he had about a dozen or so hairs above his lip masquerading as a moustache. He slumped down in a chair before his desk and Victor thought, lumberyard or state aid, there's not much ahead for this fella.

"Help you with something, Freddy?"

He nodded, his hands stuck in his jacket. "Yeah. I want to know when a crime runs out."

Victor cleared off his desk and started writing on a fresh pad of paper. "What do you mean? Statute of limitations?"

"Yeah, that's it. When you can't get arrested no more for something you did."

Victor folded his hands before him. "Depends on the crime."

"How 'bout killing someone?"

"How 'bout you stop fooling with me?"

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Freddy sat up in the chair. "I ain't foolin' about anything. I'm talking about someone being killed."

"In this state, there's no statute of limitations on murder, Freddy. That help you any?"

"Yeah, it does. I wanna report a murder, then."

He looked at the boy's eyes, seeing if the pupils were dilated or red-rimmed. They looked normal enough. And there was no scent of alcohol. What was going on here?

"Who was killed, Freddy? And when?"

"My dad. About five years ago. Someone clubbed the back of his head and buried him, and I know who done it."

Victor started taking notes, feeling the knot at the back of his neck tighten. "Who, Freddy?"

"My mom, that's who."

By the time the backhoe was positioned and started digging, the rain had started falling at a steady shower. The open pit quickly became swollen with mud and water, and as night fell Victor called up the Norwich volunteer fire department and had outside lights set up. The backhoe snorted and roared as it dug, and Victor stayed as close as he dared to the lip of the hole. Flashing lights from the trucks and the fire department vehicles crisscrossed and bounced off the house. He nodded as a figure approached. It was Percy Layman, the volunteer fire chief. Percy wore his yellow firegear and hipboots. His bald head was open to the falling rain.

"Reporters are starting to bunch up at the driveway."

"Let 'em," Victor said. "Just make sure they stay off the property, all right?"

"Sure." Percy stood next to him, looked down at the pit. "Where's Gordo?"

Victor motioned with his head. "Inside with Mrs. Hanson and the two girls. I don't want them touching or disturbing anything in the house."

"Yeah." Percy took out a grey handkerchief, blew his nose. "Any idea when you'll talk to those reporters?"

The backhoe went in for another load, and mud and brown water swirled around. Victor shrugged. "Beats the hell out of me."

"So tell me again what happened," Victor had asked.

Freddy was leaning forward in his chair, elbows resting on the desk. "Like I said before, Chief. I was around twelve. I woke up and

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heard a noise, something that made me sit up. I looked out the window and saw Mom was dragging Dad into the septic hole, by his feet. The summer before Dad had dug this hole in the front lawn to put in a septic tank but he didn't have enough money for the tank, so it stayed there. I watched it and couldn't believe it. Thought I was dreaming. And then Mom went into the garage and came out with the tractor, and leveled the hole off."

"What did you do next?"

"I ran downstairs and grabbed her and asked her what the hell was going on. She was tired and dirty and breathing hard, and she said that Dad had been beating her up, even worse than before, and she couldn't take it anymore and she clobbered the back of his head with a baseball bat. And it was going to be our secret, 'cause if she was arrested, she'd get taken away and we'd all be put in foster homes."

Victor was scribbling furiously. "Was it true? Did your father beat up on your mother?"

He shrugged, the buckles and belts jingling. "Yeah, but nothing out of the ordinary."

"Just the ordinary stuff, then," Victor said wryly.

"Yeah."

"So why are you telling us this now, Freddy, five years later?"

He hunkered down in the chair. "I got my reasons."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

Victor said, "How about letting me in on them?"

Freddy said, "Shoot, Chief, I'm almost eighteen. Be out on my own soon. It doesn't make any difference to me if she's arrested or not."

The rain was falling steadily, and the backhoe was still digging, slowly and without a rush, making the pit wider and deeper. Victor thought back again to the other day. Freddy Hanson's story sounded too strange to be true, but there seemed to be something there. After the boy had left, he had gone into the storage area and dug up, folded up and covered with dust, the original missing persons report filed on Henry Hanson. He had read and re-read it for an hour. The story seemed simple enough. Henry Hanson had walked away one night and had never come back. It wasn't unusual for him to walk, as he liked to hitchhike, but in a couple of days' time, Mrs. Hanson had reported him missing.

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There were also a few notations made by the former chief, Al Leclerk—dead now these three years—about Henry Hanson, which seemed to confirm Freddy's story. The man had worked as an itinerant farmer and lumberman, working in the forested mountains around Norwich, and he had been arrested several times for assault, assault and battery, and once for suspected rape.

An hour later he had almost put the file away, wondering again at Freddy's story, before he realized that something was missing. Follow-up reports. There were none. According to the report, in all the five years since Henry Hanson's disappearance, not once had Deborah Hanson inquired about the investigation into her husband's case.

Not once.

Maybe she already knew where he was.

With that, he got on the phone with Gordon Moore, and then with the district court judge.

The backhoe grumbled again, and in the steady rain, Victor thought he saw something in the open hole. He waved an arm and the backhoe stopped, and he got a flashlight from Percy Layman and dropped down into the pit.

The mud stopped up around his shins and his orange raincoat dragged in it. He certainly hoped the backhoe operator wouldn't burp and drop a load of the goddam mud on his head. He aimed the flashlight at a corner of the hole.

There was the toe of a man's boot.

He knelt down, the edges of his raincoat draping around him like a hoop skirt. Holding the flashlight in one hand, he gently started to scrape away at the mud. The brown-black boot came further into view, along with a tattered piece of denim, and then a bone.

Victor stood up, shaking his head. "Damn me, now, will you."

Later, after making phone calls to the medical examiner and the state police forensics team, and after allowing Deborah Hanson to make a phone call to her sister, he stood with her and Gordon Moore in the living room of the house. The two daughters—Kristin and Bridget—were huddled together on the couch, holding each other, keening and sobbing.

Victor was slightly uncomfortable, standing there with his wet raincoat and mud-splattered boots. "About your son, Freddy . . ."

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"What about him," she said, her voice flat. "He'll be taking care of himself now, I guess."

Gordon nodded at him and Victor said, "Mrs. Hanson, you'll be coming with us to the station now."

Her eyes tightened and she tugged at the neck of her sweater and glanced back at the couch. "You won't cuff me in front of the kids, now, will you?"

"No, I won't," Victor said, as he pulled a card from his pocket. "But you are under arrest, and I'll have to read you your rights."

The children kept on keening as he read the Miranda warning, and when he was done he asked, "Now that I've read you your rights, Mrs. Hanson, do you have anything to say?"

She clasped her arms in front of her, hugged herself tight.

"Men," she murmured, and she said not one more word on the ride to the station.

Deborah Hanson walked in the holding room, cigarette in hand, knowing that the mirror to the right was a two-way piece of glass, that she was being watched. She knew that, and she waited. If they were waiting for her to weep and scream and tear at her hair, then they would have a long wait. It had been five years and she'd known she had a pretty good chance of ending up in this room.

It didn't bother her, not that much. It was like knowing the destination of a trip, but not being too sure if it was over the next hill or the next mountain range.

The door opened and a man in his thirties came in, dressed in a two-piece brown suit, white shirt, and red tie. He carried a black briefcase and had a plastic smile and his hair was too carefully combed.

"Mrs. Hanson?" he said, extending his hand, which she touched for only a moment, "I'm Gerald Twomey, from the county public defender's office."

He sat down and opened up his briefcase and she said, "I'm sorry to waste your time like this, but I don't want you defending me."

He paused, holding a folder from his case. "Mrs. Hanson, I'm afraid you don't have much of a choice. I've been appointed by the court and—"

"You got a woman down there?"

"Excuse me?"

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She took a drag off her cigarette. "I said you got a woman lawyer down there in your office?"

"Yes, well, we do, but her schedule is—"

"That's who I want."

"Mrs. Hanson, I—"

"Who do you think I am? Some dumb hill woman who don't know what she's in for? Who don't know what she wants? I want that woman lawyer, that's what."

She turned in her chair and stared at the wall. It looked like cheap paneling, with hardly any backing behind it. Henry always promised he'd do up the basement, make it a play area for the girls, but no, that never did happen, now, did it. The wall was covered with scratches and grease, and duct tape covered holes where someone must have punched in a fist or a foot. She smoked her cigarette and waited and eventually she heard a briefcase being clicked shut and a door being opened and closed as the man left. Hmmph. Some man. Henry could have broken him for breakfast.

She lit another cigarette and continued to wait. Eventually, the door opened again, as she knew it would.

Victor Dumont waited in the medical examiner's office as Dr. Lewis Fernald pulled off a blood- and chemical-spattered gown and threw it into an overflowing bin, showing a blue shirt with a white collar and a red necktie. The office was in Folsom, on the other side of the county and almost an hour from Norwich. It was cramped and book-lined, with three human skulls resting on a bookshelf. One of the skulls was real, the other two were plastic. Fernald made it a constant joke of switching them around and asking visitors which one was real.

The county medical examiner was Victor's age but looked ten years older, with greying hair and a fine network of wrinkles about his brown eyes. He was also developing a small potbelly, despite the hour drive every other night to the nearest health club in this part of the state.

"How's your day going, Victor?" Fernald asked, sitting down with a sigh in his leather swivel chair. He leaned back and opened a small refrigerator and pulled out a plastic container of lemonade, which he drank straight from the bottle.

"Depends a lot on what you found out."

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The medical examiner grinned. "Like what, for example?"

"Like is that Henry Hanson you got downstairs?"

"Oh, for certain." The lemonade in one hand, he started flipping through a manilla folder. "Though he wasn't a regular dental visitor, his teeth match right up to a T. According to his records, his left clavicle—collarbone, to you uninitiated—was broken when he was in high school, and what you found in the front yard's got the same fracture. So, yeah, I'd say that's Henry Hanson."

Victor pulled out a notebook, started making some notes. "Thanks, Doc."

Fernald tipped back his lemonade. "Sure, but I knew it was Henry Hanson within five minutes of seeing him."

Victor stopped writing, looked up in surprise. "You did? How?"

The medical examiner grinned again. "Found a wet lump of leather and stuff and when I pulled it apart, saw it was his wallet, and stuck there in its plastic seal was his driver's license. Ugly son-of-a-bitch, I'd say, from his picture. Overweight, too."

"That your famous second opinion?"

"Yeah, and one more thing." Fernald put down the lemonade, picked up the folder. "You mentioned something about looking for damage in the skull and neck area."

Victor said, "That's right. The son said his mom took a Louisville slugger to the back of Dad's head."

Fernald shook his head. "If she did, it must've been made of foam rubber."

Something cold started to tickle at Victor's forehead. "What do you mean, doc?"

He shrugged. "Means Henry Hanson didn't die from a blow to his head. His skull and neck are in fine shape, Victor. Pristine, I'd guess. The only injury that's there is the old collarbone fracture."

"Then what the hell killed him?"

Fernald ruefully shook the empty lemonade container. "Victor, I'm a medical examiner, not a bloody fortuneteller. You drop a pile of bones and clothing that's been rotting in someone's front yard for five years. You tell me he died from blows to his head. I'm telling you he didn't. There's no damage that suggests anything—no fractures associated with gunshot wounds, or damage to the ribs from a knife attack."

"Great." He folded up his notebook, realizing with an ache that he had a long drive back to Norwich, with not much to show for it.

"So. Which one?"

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"Hunh?"

Fernald swung about in his chair and pointed up to the skulls. "Which one is real?"

"Oh. The one on the right, Doc."

His face fell. "How did you know?"

"I'm a cop. Got any more questions?"

The next day Victor was in the corner booth of Mona's Diner, on Route 4, leading out of town. From there he could see out a floor-to-ceiling window, looking over the Norwich Valley, right on the western edge of the White Mountains. The valley was dark green today, with even darker shadows racing across the trees and fields from the clouds overhead. In his thirty years living and working in Norwich, he had never tired of this view.

The breakfast dishes had been cleared away save for cups of coffee, and across the table from him Rachel Adair stirred in another Sweet'n'Low, her red fingernails bright against the tarnished spoon. She wore a blue dress with a faint floral pattern, snuggly fit. Around her neck and one wrist she wore gold chains, and her tinted-blonde hair reflected the morning sunlight. Her briefcase was beside her on the counter.

"I tell you, Chief, you're too good for this town. You ought to get into the state police, or go to Massachusetts and pick up some additional schooling. Maybe even the FBI academy."

He frowned as he took a sip from his mug. There were only a few other customers here this morning, and most of them were at the long counter running down one side, where Mona held court. "Counselor, I barely keep ahead of what goes on in Norwich. My mind would be spinning within five minutes of leaving here."

"You barely keep ahead because you're a one-man department. You ought to lean on the selectmen to get you more help."

"One-man department means I know what's going on. And I lean too hard on the board, they may replace me with someone a little less noisy."

Rachel drank from her cup, leaving a trace of lipstick on the mug. "They wouldn't be that stupid, hill people as they may be."

"Don't get into that hill people crap."

She smiled. "You're mad because you know it's true. You and I both grew up in the valley, relatively well-off. It's tough up in those hills. Little farms and mobile homes, miles up on dirt roads, no neighbors, electricity going out in every bad storm, late at night

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and in the winter. I don't care how good you are, Chief, you can't know what's going on up there all the time."

"Like the Hanson family, for instance."

Returning the coffee cup to the counter, she said, "That's my case and it'd be prejudicial if I discussed it with you. But let me tell you a story that might give you some insight."

"A hypothetical story?"

"Aren't those the best kind?"

"Go ahead."

Rachel folded her hands before her. "Let's say—hypothetically, of course—you're a hill woman married to an abusive man. His name is Henry."

Victor said, "Some coincidence."

"Hush. And you married young and soon, before you're thirty, you have three children. You don't have much of an education, money is tight, and you're lucky if you have meat on the table once or twice a week. You try to go on welfare but Henry won't let you. Too proud, he says, and since you're a hill woman, you partially agree. Still, it makes you hurt inside when your kids cry at night because they're hungry."

Rachel picked up a paper napkin, folded it over a few times. "Your husband isn't much of a provider, isn't much of a person. He's overweight and he smokes and he drinks too much, and he's a bit of a religious nut. And when he's drinking he starts hitting you. Nothing bad at first, nothing you haven't experienced before or seen in your family, but it makes every day a nightmare, wondering what will happen to you."

"Still hypothetical, Counselor?"

"Still hypothetical, Chief. Then you notice he starts to look at your daughters in a funny way. He visits them at night, in their bedrooms. And he starts quoting Biblical verse to you, about multiple wives. You're a hill woman. Your nearest neighbor's a half-mile away, and you have no skills. In wintertime you get to town maybe once every week. Electricity keeps on getting shut off for non-payment. You have nothing except a son and two daughters you're frightened for, a collection of bruises, and a hate that's beginning to burn inside you. You're this hill woman, Chief Victor Dumont, and what do you do?"

"Take a baseball bat and bash in his head?"

Rachel smiled. "Hardly. No, you wait. You let your hate grow and one night, after eating a heavy meal, Henry goes to the couch and

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sits down and rolls his eyes and clutches at his chest, and he dies, right there. The horrible thing in your life is gone, right before your eyes. But there's a problem."

"No life insurance?"

Rachel said, "Think, Chief. Think. All of your hate hasn't helped you or done anything. He's escaped your hate. He's gone. But you still want your revenge—you still want to get back at him. And how do you do this to a God-fearing man like Henry?"

He nodded and started tapping on his empty coffee mug with a spoon. "You bury his body in an unmarked, unconsecrated grave."

"Exactly," she said, smiling. Her teeth were white and even. "You toss him into a septic tank hole and cover him up. And you get your revenge, and you get your comfort, because every day you walk out of your house, you're walking on his grave, and it's not in holy ground. Everything's fine, until your son comes of age."

"And that story?"

"That story revolves around an inheritance you get from a distant uncle. He decides that as head of the family, he deserves a cut. You say no, he gets mad and goes to the cops with a crazy story that you murdered his daddy."

"Hell of a story."

"A hell of a story because you know it's true, Chief. I've read the autopsy report and the statements, and you've got nothing on Deborah Hanson, except for maybe disposing of human remains improperly, and even with that, she'll plead the Fifth Amendment. Your witness Freddy's skipped out of town and no one's been able to find him since. You and the State have zip."

"I'll let the State decide that."

A teenage waitress in a stained pink uniform slapped down the bill. On the back of her hand was the tattoo of a butterfly. Rachel picked up the paper. "On me today, Chief. I'll bill it out."

He picked up his hat. "You got anything going on tonight, Counselor?"

She smiled and winked. "Like what, Victor?"

"Thought maybe we'd discuss some precedents."

She laughed and the throaty sound thrilled him. "Fine. Out on Route 12, past Canaan. The Bluebird Motel. Ten o'clock sound okay?"

"Fine."

She winked again. "Wear your utility belt?"

"Only if you file the right motion."

"I'll work on it."

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Deborah Hanson sat on her bunk at the Franconia County Jail, working on her third cigarette of the night. She sat up against the rough concrete and looked out at the bars, listening to the televisions and the radios and the catcalls and shouts of the other prisoners. Most of them were in for petty crap, like drunk driving or stealing things to support their boyfriends' drug habits. She was the only one in for a serious crime, as serious as the cops made it out to be, and the other inmates left her alone.

Finished with the cigarette, she tossed it into the metal toilet. For a brief moment she considered telling it all. Life wouldn't be that bad here. Three meals a day, simple work compared to what she was used to, and no more worrying or scraping by. Everything taken care of.

But there were Kristin and Bridget to think of, and if she did talk up, they wouldn't keep her here in the county lockup. No, they'd send her to the new woman's prison in Concord, almost two hours away, and that'd be no way for the girls to grow up. And Freddy, well, he was more of Henry's child than hers, and now he was nothing to her, ever since he went to the police.

Damn the boy's blood, anyway.

She lit another cigarette, let the flame burn down the match's length until it scorched her skin. The girls were at her sister's, along with that mangy mutt. They'd do all right. For she was sure she'd be out soon.

Just as soon as the valley folks got their heads straight.

Victor Dumont sat on the hood of his cruiser, next to Gordon Moore. It was almost midnight and he had driven the cruiser up to Overlook Point. In the valley below them were the few lights of Norwich. Victor had a bottle of Beck's beer wrapped in a paper bag. He had to drive a half hour to a store that sold it but he had grown to love the taste. Gordon drank from a thermos, whiskey and water.

"You could get in trouble, you know," Gordon said, "drinking on the job."

"Hell I could. I called the dispatch three hours ago and told them I was going home. The roads of Norwich now belong to your brother state troopers."

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Gordon nodded. "Earl Blake's on tonight. He'll do you all right."

He drank some more beer. The night birds were out, squawking and hunting in the woods. "We're gonna lose this one tomorrow, aren't we, Gordo?"

Gordon wrapped himself tighter in his coat. "That we are, my friend. My recommendation was that we not even bring it to the grand jury, but the A.G.'s office wouldn't hear of it. So they'll go up to the County Court tomorrow and so will we, and we'll tell our little stories, and after Deborah Hanson's let loose, we can lie to the newspapers and say we did a good job."

"Weren't much there," Victor said.

Gordon poured himself another tumbler, his knees high up since his feet were resting on the front bumper. "Nope. Just a body in a front yard and a familiar story."

"You thinking about the Wilson family?"

Even in the faint moonlight he could see Gordon staring down at his hands. "That I am. Three years ago and it still gives me the shakes. Middle of February, up at Towle's Purchase. The Blizzard Month, you'll recall that's what the papers named it. Every few days we'd get a snowstorm barreling through, and by the time people made headway in getting dug out, another storm'd pass through and dump another foot. Some places were cut off for almost a week."

"Including the Wilsons'."

"Yeah. Some sister got concerned she hadn't heard from the Wilsons so me and Fern Goodwin—he quit as the chief there right afterwards—and a state plow went up there. Nothing but acres of fields and woods and this farmhouse, and inside the five boys and girls and their two parents, all dead. Couldn't get the smell of blood out of my mind for weeks after that. And the forensics work, my lord, what we had to do to learn what happened there."

"Still hard to believe," Victor said, "as much as I do."

"Yeah. But I was out on their front porch while we were working up the forensics, just looking at all that blank whiteness for miles around, just closing in on you. Made me think, just for a second, why they did it. Killed their own children, then each other. I understood it. Just for a second."

A car came up on Overlook Point and when the headlights touched the cruiser, it quickly backed away. Victor took another taste of his beer. "Young love. They'll have to go somewhere else."

"As much as there is, in Norwich."

"You believe Deborah Hanson's story?"

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Gordon screwed on the top of his thermos. "Five or ten years ago, you ask me that, and I would've said no. After working in this county and seeing stuff like the Wilson family, I can believe almost anything. Odd things go on up in the hills."

Victor nodded. "Know what you mean. Whole thing has a sense of irony about it. She probably saw her chance when his heart went out. Remember I saw a Clint Eastwood movie once, a western. Some lady said, 'They say the dead don't rest without a marker.' Maybe that's what Deborah Hanson was doing. Making sure Henry Hanson never rested."

"Maybe so. But she'll have to think of something else now."

"What do you mean?" Victor asked.

Gordon drew his coat around him as a breeze rose up. "Right now what's left of Henry Hanson's resting in a real grave, with a real headstone. Some things don't last."

Victor said, "Maybe they last long enough."

Two days later Victor Dumont was re-tracing his first visit to the Hanson family, but there were some differences. It was a warmer day, and there was no rain, and the recently released Deborah Hanson was sitting next to him in the cruiser as he brought her back to her house.

He had been surprised that she had specifically requested he drive her back, but she had looked at him at the county jail and said, "Chief, you brought me here. And by God, you're going to bring me back."

He couldn't argue with her. It made sense.

Up the gravel driveway, past the rusting mailbox again, it was just like last week. By God, what a hell of a difference a few days made. He pulled the cruiser to a stop before the gaping hole where they had found Henry Hanson.

"Your daughters?" Victor asked, leaving the cruiser's engine running.

Deborah said, "At my sister's. They and the dog will be coming back tonight."

"And your son Freddy?"

She went into her purse, pulled out a pack of Marlboros. "He's almost of age and he's moved out. I've not seen or heard from him in weeks. He ain't my son anymore. And he won't be welcome back."

Victor nodded in the direction of the excavation. "I'll have Tower Excavation come up and take care of this hole."

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"No, don't do that," Deborah Hanson said. "The tractor's still in the barn. I'll take her out this afternoon and fill it in myself. Might send you a bill for that, though."

"Go ahead."

Victor tapped a bit on the steering wheel and said, "Mrs. Hanson, with the grand jury decision you're a free woman. You know, with the news accounts about what kind of man your husband was and the attitude of the people who live here in this county, well, I don't think there's anything that will put you back before the grand jury."

She said, "You mean, a cousin or other relation comes forward with another crazy story 'bout how I killed Henry, nothing's gonna happen?"

"Probably not."

"So I could say practically anything to you right now, and it'd be my word against yours, and I'm still okay."

"Most likely."

She took out a cigarette and lit it, inhaling deeply. "Let me tell you this one thing, Chief. Henry was a good man in some ways, 'cept when he drank. And the problem was, it got so he was drinking all the time. And that good part left. When he was sobered up, he liked to sit at the kitchen table and quote Bible verse at me. One thing, stuck in my mind, was 'The Lord moves in mysterious ways.' I guess that's one phrase that explains everything."

"Maybe so," he said, staring at her.

She stared right back. "If you'll excuse me, I've got a place to clean up. My daughters coming back and all."

"Sure," he said, and after she stepped out he backed the cruiser down the hill, remembering the look in her face, the way her eyes just fell for that moment and revealed everything, and he knew.

Didn't know how. But he just knew.

After taking a long shower—the ones at the jail she never could relax in, too many bodies around—she changed her clothes and opened every window in her house. The girls would be coming back soon and she wanted to have the place look nice for them. Maybe drive down and get some ice cream. Now, that would be a treat.

Deborah Hanson went into the barn and walked past the John Deere tractor with a bucket attachment on the front. The bucket was covered with a canvas tarp. It was cool in the barn. She had

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depended on that. She slipped on a pair of work gloves and started up the tractor. It took four tries before the engine caught. Goddam thing needed a new battery.

As she drove the tractor out she looked over, once, at the long wooden shelf on the near wall. There were chains up there, and gardening tools and other work gloves and lengths of green hose and there, by the end and almost covered by old newspaper, a can of rat poison.

Sure, little Freddy had seen her, five years ago, dump Henry's body in the old septic tank hole. She had told him a story, to safeguard her future, and the boy had believed her then, about the baseball bat and all.

Like the valley people believed her story now.

She halted the tractor at the edge of the hole, where last week they had torn up her front lawn looking for Henry's body. Well, she couldn't say she wasn't warned. She always knew that eventually someone would find out, and the night before they did come up, with their warrants and backhoes, Freddy had come by, drunk and itching for a fight, to boast that he had gone to the cops.

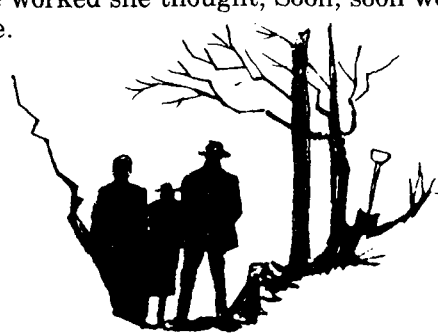
Drinking, just like his father. And before he left, she fed him well, just like his father.

Switching the throttle on high, she tilted the front bucket and the canvas covering popped off, and Freddy—wrapped in rope and green trash bags—tumbled to the bottom of the hole.

She backed the tractor away and started to move the dirt in. Another Bible verse, there, valley cop. One my mother and her mother and her mother before her passed down to me.

The Lord helps those who help themselves.

More dirt trickled and fell in, covering up the green bags and rope, and as she worked she thought, Soon, soon we'll tell the girls about that verse.



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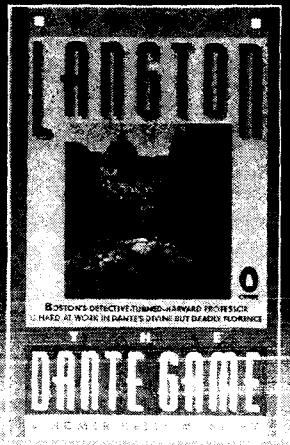

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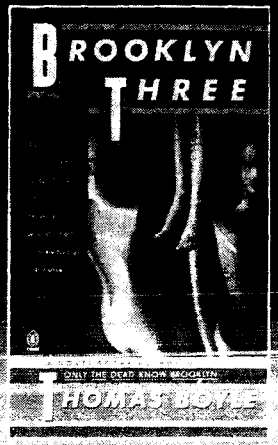

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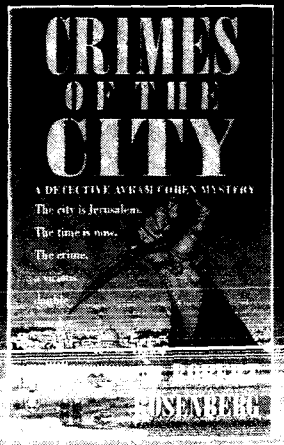

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The tales of ghosts and witches associated with Halloween in the U.S. and the British Isles have their origin in Celtic lore, but superstitions about the spirits of the dead, or "lemures," as the ancient Romans called them, were also prevalent at the time of Steven Saylor's story. To exorcise these troublesome spirits, the Romans held rites each spring (the Lemuria)—to no avail in the case of the soldier in the following tale, for each autumn the lemures of those he killed in battle return to haunt him, until he wisely consults Gordianus . . .

THE LEMURES

by STEVEN SAYLOR

The slave pressed a scrap of parchment into my hand:

> From Lucius Claudius to his friend Gordianus, greetings. If you will accompany this messenger on his return, I will be grateful. I am at the house of a friend on the Palatine Hill; there is a problem which requires your attention. Come alone—do not bring the boy—the circumstances might frighten him.

Lucius need not have warned me against bringing Eco, for at that moment the boy was busy with his tutor. From the garden, where they had found a patch of morning sunlight to ward off the October chill, I could hear the old man declaiming while Eco wrote the day's Latin lesson on his wax tablet.

"Bethesda!" I called out, but she was already behind me, holding open my woolen cloak. As she slipped it over my shoulders, she glanced down at the note in my hand. She wrinkled her nose. Unable

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to read, Bethesda regards the written word with suspicion and disdain.

"From Lucius Claudius?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Why, yes, but how—?" Then I realized she must have recognized his messenger. Slaves often take more notice of one another than do their masters.

"I suppose he wants you to go gaming with him, or to taste the new vintage from one of his vineyards." She tossed back her mane of jet-black hair and pouted her luscious lips.

"I suppose not; he has work for me."

A smile flickered at the corner of her mouth.

"Not that it should be any concern of yours," I added quickly. Since I had taken Eco in from the streets and legally adopted him, Bethesda had begun to behave less and less like a concubine and more and more like a wife and mother. I wasn't sure I liked the change; I was even less sure I had any control over it.

"Frightening work," I added. "Probably dangerous." But she was already busy adding to the household accounts in her head. As I stepped out the door I heard her humming a happy Egyptian tune from her childhood.

The day was bright and crisp. Drifts of leaves lined either side of the narrow winding pathway that led from my house down the slope of the Esquiline Hill to the Subura below. The tang of smoke was on the air, rising from kitchens and braziers. The messenger drew his dark green cloak more tightly about his shoulders to ward off the chill.

"Neighbor! Citizen!" a voice hissed at me from the wall to my right. I looked up and saw two eyes peering down at me, surmounted by the dome of a bald, knobby head. "Neighbor—yes, you! Gordianus, they call you; am I right?"

I looked up at him warily. "Yes, Gordianus is my name."

"And Detectus, they call you—'the Finder,' yes?"

"Yes."

"You solve puzzles. Plumb mysteries. Answer riddles."

"Sometimes."

"Then you must help me!"

"Perhaps, Citizen. But not now. A friend summons me—"

"This will take only a moment."

"Even so, I grow cold standing here—"

"Then come inside! I'll open the little door in the wall and let you in."

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"No—perhaps tomorrow."

"No! Now! They will come tonight, I know it—or even this afternoon, when the shadows lengthen. See, the clouds are coming up. If the sun grows dim, they may come out at midday beneath the dark, brooding sky."

"They? Whom do you mean, Citizen?"

His eyes grew large, yet his voice became quite tiny, like the voice of a mouse. "The lemures . . ." he squeaked.

The messenger clutched at his cloak. I felt the sudden chill myself, but it was only a cold, dry wind gusting down the pathway that made me shiver; or so I told myself.

"Lemures," the man repeated. "The unquiet dead."

Leaves scattered and danced about my feet. A thin finger of cloud obscured the sun, dimming its bright, cold light to a hazy grey.

"Vengeful," the man whispered. "Full of spite. Empty of all remorse. Human no longer, spirits sucked dry of warmth and pity, desiccated and brittle like shards of bone, with nothing left but wickedness. Dead, but not gone from this world as they should be. Revenge is their only food. The only gift they offer is madness."

I stared into the man's dark, sunken eyes for a long moment, then broke from his gaze. "A friend calls me," I said, nodding for the slave to go on.

"But neighbor, you can't abandon me. I was a soldier for Sulla! I fought in the civil war to save the Republic! I was wounded—if you'll step inside you'll see. My left leg is no good at all, I have to hobble and lean against a stick. While you, you're young and whole and healthy. A young Roman like you owes me some respect. Please—there's no one else to help me!"

"My business is with the living, not the dead," I said sternly.

"I can pay you, if that's what you mean. Sulla gave all his soldiers farms up in Etruria. I sold mine—I was never meant to be a farmer. I still have silver left. I can pay you a handsome fee, if you'll help me."

"And how can I help you? If you have a problem with lemures, consult a priest or an augur."

"I have, believe me! Every May, at the Lemuria, I take part in the procession to ward off evil spirits. I mutter the incantations, I cast the black beans over my shoulder. Perhaps it works; the lemures never come to me in spring, and they stay away all summer. But as surely as leaves wither and fall from the trees, they come to me every autumn. They come to drive me mad!"

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"Citizen, I cannot—"

"They cast a spell inside my head."

"Citizen! I must go."

"Please," he whispered. "I was a soldier once, brave, afraid of nothing. I killed many men, fighting for Sulla, for Rome. I waded through rivers of blood and valleys of gore up to my hips and never quailed. I feared no one. And now . . ." He made a face of such self-loathing that I turned away. "Help me," he pleaded.

"Perhaps . . . when I return. . . . "

He smiled pitifully, like a doomed man given a reprieve. "Yes," he whispered, "when you return. . . . "

I hurried on.

The house on the Palatine, like its neighbors, presented a rather plain facade, despite its location in the city's most exclusive district. Except for two pillars in the form of dryads supporting the roof, the portico's only adornment was a funeral wreath of cypress and fir on the door.

The short hallway, flanked on either side by the wax masks of noble ancestors, led to a modest atrium. On an ivory bier, a body lay in state. I stepped forward and looked down at the corpse. I saw a young man, not yet thirty, unremarkable except for the grimace that contorted his features. Normally the anointers are able to remove signs of distress and suffering from the faces of the dead, to smooth wrinkled brows and unclench tightened jaws. But the face of this corpse had grown rigid beyond the power of the anointers to soften it. Its expression was not of pain or misery, but of fear.

"He fell," said a familiar voice behind me.

I turned to see my one-time client and since-then friend, Lucius Claudius. He was as portly as ever, and not even the gloomy light of the atrium could dim the cherry-red of his cheeks and nose.

We exchanged greetings, then turned our eyes to the corpse.

"Titus," explained Lucius, "the owner of this house. For the last two years, anyway."

"He died from a fall?"

"Yes. There's a gallery that runs along the west side of the house, with a long balcony that overlooks a steep hillside. Titus fell from the balcony three nights ago. He broke his back."

"And died at once?"

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"No. He lingered through the night and lived until nightfall the next day. He told a curious tale before he died. Of course, he was feverish and in great pain, despite the draughts of nepenthes he was given. . . ." Lucius shifted his considerable bulk uneasily inside his vast black cloak and reached up nervously to scratch at his frazzled wreath of copper-colored hair. "Tell me, Gordianus, do you have any knowledge of lemures?"

A strange expression must have crossed my face, for Lucius frowned and wrinkled his brow. "Have I said something untoward, Gordianus?"

"Not at all. But this is the second time today that someone has spoken to me of lemures. On the way here, a soldier, a neighbor of mine—but I won't bore you with the tale. All Rome seems to be haunted by spirits today! It must be this oppressive weather . . . this gloomy time of year . . . or indigestion, as my father used to say—"

"It was not indigestion that killed my husband. Nor was it a cold wind, or a chilly drizzle, or a nervous imagination."

The speaker was a tall, thin woman. A stola of black wool covered her from neck to feet; about her shoulders was a wrap of dark blue. Her black hair was drawn back from her face and piled atop her head, held together by silver pins and combs. Her eyes were a glittering blue. Her face was young, but she was no longer a girl. She held herself as rigorously upright as a vestal, and spoke with the imperious tone of a patrician.

"This," said Lucius, "is Gordianus, the man I told you about." The woman acknowledged me with a slight nod. "And this," he continued, "is my dear young friend, Cornelia. From the Sullan branch of the Cornelius family."

I gave a slight start.

"Yes," she said, "blood relative to our recently departed and deeply missed dictator. Lucius Cornelius Sulla was my cousin. We were quite close, despite the difference in our ages. I was with dear Sulla just before he died, down at his villa in Neapolis. A great man. A generous man." Her imperious tone softened. She turned her gaze to the corpse on the bier. "Now Titus is dead, too. I am alone. Defenseless . . ."

"Perhaps we should withdraw to the library," suggested Lucius.

"Yes," said Cornelia, "it's cold here in the atrium."

She led us down a short hallway into a small room. My sometime-client Cicero would not have called it much of a library—there was only a single cabinet piled with scrolls against one wall—but he

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would have approved of its austerity. The walls were stained a somber red and the chairs were backless. A slave tended to the brazier in the corner and departed.

"How much does Gordianus know?" said Cornelia, to Lucius.

"Very little. I only explained that Titus fell from the balcony."

She looked at me with an intensity that was almost frightening. "My husband was a haunted man."

"Haunted by whom, or what? Lucius spoke to me of lemures."

"Not plural, but singular," she said. "He was tormented by one lemur only."

"Was this spirit known to him?"

"Yes. An acquaintance from his youth; they studied law together in the Forum. The man who owned this house before us. His name was Furius."

"This lemur appeared to your husband more than once?"

"It began last summer. Titus would glimpse the thing for only a moment—beside the road on the way to our country villa, or across the Forum, or in a pool of shadow outside the house. At first he wasn't sure what it was; he would turn back and try to find it, only to discover it had vanished. Then he began to see it inside the house. That was when he realized who and what it was. He no longer tried to approach it; quite the opposite, he fled the thing, quaking with fear."

"Did you see it, as well?"

She stiffened. "Not at first . . ."

"Titus saw it, the night he fell," whispered Lucius. He leaned forward and took Cornelia's hand, but she pulled it away.

"That night," she whispered, "Titus was brooding, pensive. He left me in my sitting room and stepped onto the balcony to pace and take a breath of cold air. Then he saw the thing—so he told the story later, in his delirium. It came toward him, beckoning. It spoke his name. Titus fled to the end of the balcony. The thing came closer. Titus grew mad with fear—somehow he fell."

"The thing pushed him?" I said.

She shrugged. "Whether he fell or was pushed, it was his fear of the thing that finally killed him. He survived the fall; he lingered through the night and the next day. Twilight came. Titus began to sweat and tremble. Even the least movement was agony to him, yet he thrashed and writhed on the bed, mad with panic. He said he could not bear to see the lemur again. At last he died. Do you understand? He chose to die rather than confront the lemur again. You

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saw his face. It was not pain that killed him. It was fear."

I pulled my cloak over my hands and curled my toes. It seemed to me that the brazier did nothing to banish the cold from the room. "This lemur," I said, "how did your husband describe it?"

"The thing was not hard to recognize. It was Furius, who owned this house before us. Its flesh was pocked and white, its teeth broken and yellow. Its hair was like bloody straw, and there was blood all around its neck. It gave off a foul odor . . . but it was most certainly Furius. Except . . ."

"Yes?"

"Except that it looked younger than Furius at the end of his life. It looked closer to the age when Furius and Titus knew one another in the Forum, in the days of their young manhood."

"When did you first see the lemur yourself?"

"Last night. I was on the balcony—thinking of Titus and his fall. I turned and saw the thing, but only for an instant. I fled into the house—and it spoke to me."

"What did it say?"

"Two words: *Now you.* Oh!" Cornelia drew in a quick, strangled breath. She clutched at her wrap and gazed at the fire.

I stepped closer to the brazier, spreading my fingers to catch the warmth. "What a strange day!" I muttered. "What can I say to you, Cornelia, except what I said to another who told me a tale of lemures earlier today: why do you consult me instead of an augur? These are mysteries about which I know very little. Tell me a tale of a purloined jewel or a stolen document; call on me with a case of parricide or show me a corpse with an unknown killer. With these I might help you; about such matters I know more than a little. But how to placate a lemur, I do not know. Of course, I will always come when my friend Lucius Claudius calls me; but I begin to wonder why I am here at all."

Cornelia studied the crackling embers and did not answer.

"Perhaps," I ventured, "you believe this lemur is not a lemur at all. If in fact it is a living man—"

"It doesn't matter what I believe or don't believe," she snapped. I saw in her eyes the same pleading and desperation I had seen in the soldier's eyes. "No priest can help me; there is no protection against a vengeful lemur. Yet, perhaps the thing is really human, after all. Such a pretense is possible, isn't it?"

"Possible? I suppose."

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"Then you know of such cases, of a man masquerading as a lemur?"

"I have no personal experience—"

"That's why I asked Lucius to call you. If this creature is in fact human and alive, then you may be able to save me from it. If instead it is what it appears to be, a lemur, then—then nothing can save me. I am doomed." She gasped and bit her knuckles.

"But if it was your husband's death the thing desired—"

"Haven't you been listening? I told you what it said to me: *Now you*. Those were the words it spoke!" Cornelia sobbed. Lucius went to her side. Slowly she calmed herself.

"Very well, Cornelia. I will help you if I can. First, questions. From answers come answers. Can you speak?"

She bit her lips and nodded.

"You say the thing has the face of Furius. Did your husband think so?"

"My husband remarked on it, over and over. He saw the thing very close, more than once. On the night he fell, the creature came near enough for him to smell its fetid breath. He recognized it beyond a doubt."

"And you? You say you saw it for only an instant before you fled. Are you sure it was Furius you saw last night on the balcony?"

"Yes! An instant was all I needed. Horrible—discolored, distorted, wearing a hideous grin—but the face of Furius, I have no doubt."

"And yet younger than you remember."

"Yes. Somehow the cheeks, the mouth . . . what makes a face younger or older? I don't know, I can only say that in spite of its hideousness the thing looked as Furius looked when he was a younger man. Not the Furius who died two years ago, but Furius when he was a beardless youth, slender and strong and full of ambition."

"I see. In such a case, three possibilities occur to me. Could this indeed have been Furius—not his lemur, but the man himself? Are you certain that he's dead?"

"Oh, yes."

"There is no doubt?"

"No doubt at all . . ." She shivered and seemed to leave something unspoken. I looked at Lucius, who quickly looked away.

"Then perhaps this Furius had a brother?"

"A much older brother," she nodded.

"Not a twin?"

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"No. Besides, his brother died in the civil war."

"Oh?"

"Fighting against Sulla."

"I see. Then perhaps Furius had a son, the very image of his father?"

Cornelia shook her head. "His only child was an infant daughter. His only other survivors were his wife and mother, and a sister, I think."

"And where are the survivors now?"

Cornelia averted her eyes. "I'm told they moved into his mother's house on the Caelian Hill."

"So: Furius is assuredly dead, he had no twin—no living brother at all—and he left no son. And yet the thing which haunted your husband, by his own account and yours, bore the face of Furius."

Cornelia sighed, exasperated. "Useless! I called on you only out of desperation." She pressed her hands to her eyes. "Oh, my head pounds like thunder. The night will come and how will I bear it? Go now, please. I want to be alone."

Lucius escorted me to the atrium. "What do you think?" he said.

"I think that Cornelia is a very frightened woman, and her husband was a frightened man. Why was he so fearful of this particular lemur? If the dead man had been his friend—"

"An acquaintance, Gordianus, not exactly a friend."

"Is there something more that I should know?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "You know how I detest gossip. And really, Cornelia is not nearly as venal as some people think. There is a good side of her that few people see."

"It would be best if you told me everything, Lucius. For Cornelia's sake."

He pursed his small mouth, furrowed his fleshy brow and scratched his bald pate. "Oh, very well," he muttered. "As I told you, Cornelia and her husband have lived in this house for two years. It has also been two years since Furius died."

"And this is no coincidence?"

"Furius was the original owner of this house. Titus and Cornelia acquired it when he was executed for his crimes against Sulla and the state."

"I begin to see . . ."

"Perhaps you do. Furius and his family were on the wrong side of the civil war, political enemies of Sulla's. When Sulla achieved absolute power and compelled the Senate to appoint him dictator,

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he purged the Republic of his foes. The proscriptions—"

"Names posted on lists in the Forum; yes, I remember only too well."

"Once a man was proscribed, anyone could hunt him down and bring his head to Sulla for a bounty. I don't have to remind you of the bloodbath, you were here; you saw the heads mounted on spikes outside the Senate."

"And Furius's head was among them?"

"Yes. He was proscribed, arrested, and beheaded. You ask if Cornelia is certain that Furius is dead? Yes, because she saw his head on a spike, with blood oozing from the neck. Meanwhile, his property was confiscated and put up for public auction—"

"But the auctions were not always public," I said. "Sulla's friends usually had first choice of the finest farms and villas."

"As did Sulla's relations," added Lucius, wincing. "Yes, I'm afraid that when Furius was caught and beheaded, Titus and Cornelia didn't hesitate to contact Sulla immediately and put their mark on this house. Cornelia had always coveted it; why pass up the opportunity to possess it, and for a song?" He lowered his voice. "The rumor is that they placed the only bid, for the unbelievable sum of a thousand sesterces!"

"The price of a mediocre Egyptian rug," I said. "Quite a bargain."

"If Cornelia has a flaw, it's her avarice. In that, she's hardly alone. Greed is the great vice of our age."

"But not the only vice."

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me, Lucius, was this Furius really such a great enemy of our late, lamented dictator? Was he such a terrible threat to the security of the state and to Sulla's personal safety that he truly belonged on the proscription lists?"

"I don't understand."

"There were those who ended up on the lists because they were too rich for their own good, because they possessed things that others coveted."

Lucius frowned. "Gordianus, what I've already told you is scandalous enough, and I'll ask you not to repeat it. I don't know what further implication you may have drawn, and I don't care to know. I think we should drop the matter."

Friend he may be, but Lucius is also of patrician blood; the cords that bind the rich together are made of gold, and are stronger than iron.

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I made my way homeward, pondering the strange and fatal haunting of Titus and his wife. I had forgotten completely about the soldier until I heard him hissing at me from his garden wall.

"Yes, yes! You said you'd come back to help me, and here you are. Come inside!" He disappeared, and a moment later a little wooden door in the wall opened inward. I stooped and stepped inside to find myself in a garden open to the sky, surrounded by a colonnade. The scent of burning leaves filled my nostrils; an elderly slave was gathering leaves with a rake, arranging them in piles about a small brazier in the center of the garden.

The soldier smiled at me crookedly. I judged him to be not much older than myself, despite his bald head and the grey hairs that bristled from his eyebrows. The dark circles beneath his eyes marked him as a man who badly needed sleep and a respite from worry. He hobbled past me and pulled up a chair for me to sit on.

"Tell me, neighbor, did you grow up in the countryside?" he said. His voice cracked slightly, as if pleasant discourse was a strain to him.

"No, I was born in Rome."

"Ah. I grew up near Arpinum myself. I only mention it because I saw you staring at the leaves and the fire. I know how city folk dread fires and shun them except for heat and cooking. It's a country habit, burning leaves. Dangerous, but I'm careful. The smell reminds me of my boyhood. As does this garden."

I looked up at the tall, denuded trees that loomed in stark silhouette against the cloudy sky. Among them were some cypresses and yews that still wore their shaggy, grey-green coats. A weirdly twisted little tree, hardly more than a bush, stood in the corner, surrounded by a carpet of round, yellow leaves. The old slave walked slowly toward the bush and began to rake its leaves in among the others.

"Have you lived in this house long?" I asked.

"For three years. I cashed in the farm Sulla gave me and bought this place. I retired before the fighting was finished. My leg was crippled, and another wound made my sword arm useless. My shoulder still hurts me now and again, especially at this time of year, when the weather turns cold. This is a bad time of year, all around."

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He grimaced, whether at a phantom pain in his shoulder or at phantoms in the air I could not tell.

"When did you first see the lemures?" I asked. Since the man insisted on taking my time, there was no point in being subtle.

"Just after I moved into this house."

"Ah, then perhaps the lemures were here before you arrived."

"No," he said gravely. "They must have followed me here." He limped toward the brazier, stooped stiffly, gathered up a handful of leaves and scattered them on the fire. "Only a little at a time," he said softly. "Wouldn't want to be careless with a fire in the garden. Besides, it makes the pleasure last. A little today, a little more tomorrow. Burning leaves reminds me of boyhood."

"How do you know they followed you? The lemures, I mean."

"Because I recognize them."

"Who were they?"

"I never knew their names." He stared into the fire. "But I remember the Etruscan's face when my sword cut open his entrails and he looked up at me, gasping and unbelieving. I remember the bloodshot eyes of the sentries we surprised one night outside Capua. They had been drinking, the fools. When we stuck our swords into their bellies, I could smell the wine amid the stench that came pouring out. I remember the boy I killed in battle once—so young and tender my blade sliced clear through his neck. His head went flying off. One of my men caught it and cast it back at me, laughing. It landed at my feet. I swear, the boy's eyes were still open, and he knew what was happening to him. . . ."

He stooped, groaning at the effort, and gathered another handful of leaves. "The flames make all things pure again," he whispered. "The odor of burning leaves is the smell of innocence."

He watched the fire for a long moment. "They come at this time of year, the lemures. Seeking revenge. They cannot harm my body. They had their chance to do that when they were living, and they only succeeded in maiming me. It was I who killed their bodies, I who triumphed. Now they seek to drive me mad. They cast a spell on me. They cloud my mind and draw me into the pit. They shriek and dance about my head, they open their bellies over me and bury me in offal, they dismember themselves and drown me in a sea of blood and gore. Somehow I've always struggled free, but my will grows weaker every year. One day they will draw me into the pit and I will never come out again."

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He covered his face. "Go now. I'm ashamed that you should see me like this. When you see me again, it will be more terrible than you can imagine. But you will come, when I send for you? You will come and see them for yourself? A man as clever as you might strike a bargain, even with the dead."

He dropped his hands. I would hardly have recognized his face—his eyes were red, his cheeks gaunt, his lips trembling. "Swear to me that you will come, Gordianus. If only to bear witness to my destruction."

"I do not make oaths—"

"Then promise me as a man, and leave the gods out of it. I beg you to come when I call."

"I will come," I finally sighed, thinking that a promise to a madman was not truly binding.

The old slave, clucking and shaking his head with worry, ushered me to the little door. "I fear that your master is already mad," I whispered. "These lemures are from his own imagination."

"Oh, no," said the old slave. "I have seen them, too."

"You?"

"Yes, just as he described."

"And the other slaves?"

"We have all seen the lemures."

I looked into the old slave's calm, unblinking eyes for a long moment. Then I stepped through the passage and he shut the door behind me.

"A veritable plague of lemures!" I said as I lay upon my couch taking dinner that night. "Rome is overrun by them."

Bethesda, who sensed the unease beneath my levity, tilted her head and arched an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"And that silly warning Lucius Claudius wrote in his note this morning! 'Do not bring the boy, the circumstances might frighten him'—ha! What could be more appealing to a twelve-year-old boy than the chance to see a genuine lemur!"

Eco chewed a mouthful of bread and watched me with round eyes, not sure whether I was joking or not.

"The whole affair seems quite absurd to me," ventured Bethesda. She crossed her arms impatiently. As was her custom, she had already eaten in the kitchen, and merely watched while Eco and I

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feasted. "As even the stupidest person in Egypt knows, the bodies of the dead cannot survive unless they have been carefully mummified according to ancient laws. How could the body of a dead man be wandering about Rome, frightening this Titus into jumping off a balcony? Especially a dead man who had his head cut off. It was a living fiend who *pushed* him off the balcony, that much is obvious. Ha! I'll wager it was his wife who did it!"

"Then what of the soldier's haunting? The old slave swears that the whole household has seen the lemures. Not just one, but a whole swarm of them."

"Fah! The slave lies to excuse his master's feeblemindedness. He is loyal, as a slave should be, but not necessarily honest."

"Even so, I think I shall go if the soldier calls me, to judge with my own eyes. And the matter of the lemur on the Palatine Hill is worth pursuing, if only for the handsome fee that Cornelia promises."

Bethesda shrugged. To change the subject, I turned to Eco. "And speaking of outrageous fees, what did that thief of a tutor teach you today?"

Eco jumped from his couch and ran to fetch his stylus and wax tablet.

Bethesda uncrossed her arms. "If you continue with these matters," she said, her voice now pitched to conceal her own unease, "I think that your friend Lucius Claudius gives you good advice. There is no need to take Eco along with you. He's busy with his lessons and should stay at home. He's safe here, from evil men and evil spirits alike."

I nodded, for I had been thinking the same thing myself.

The next morning I stepped quietly past the soldier's house. He did not spy me and call out, though I could tell he was awake and in his garden; I smelled the tang of burning leaves on the air.

I had promised Lucius and Cornelia that I would come again to the house on the Palatine, but there was another call I wanted to make first.

A few questions in the right ears and a few coins in the right hands were all it took to find the house of Furius's mother on the Caelian Hill, where his survivors had fled after he was proscribed, beheaded, and dispossessed. The house was small and narrow,

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wedged in among other small, narrow houses that might have been standing for a hundred years; the street had somehow survived the fires and the constant rebuilding that continually changes the face of the city, and seemed to take me into an older, simpler Rome, when rich and poor alike lived in modest private dwellings, before the powerful began to flaunt their wealth with great houses and the poor were pressed together into many-storied tenements.

A knock upon the door summoned a veritable giant, a hulking, thick-chested slave with squinting eyes and a scowling mouth—not the door slave of a secure and respectable home, but quite obviously a bodyguard. I stepped back a few paces so that I did not have to strain to look up at him, and asked to see his master.

"If you had legitimate business here, you'd know that there is no master in this house," he growled.

"Of course," I said, "I misspoke myself. I meant to say your mistress—the mother of the late Furius."

He scowled. "Do you misspeak yourself again, stranger, or could it be that you don't know that the old mistress had a stroke not long after her son's death? She and her daughter are in seclusion and see no one."

"What was I thinking? I meant to say, of course, Furius's widow—"

But the slave had had enough of me, and slammed the door in my face.

I heard a cackle of laughter behind me and turned to see a toothless old slavewoman sweeping the portico of the house across the street. "You'd have had an easier time getting in to see the dictator Sulla when he was alive," she laughed.

I smiled and shrugged. "Are they always so unfriendly and abrupt?"

"With strangers, always. You can't blame them—a house full of women with no man around but a bodyguard."

"No man in the house—ah, not since Furius was executed."

"You knew him?" asked the slavewoman.

"Not exactly. But I know of him."

"Terrible, what they did to him. He was no enemy of Sulla's. Furius had no stomach for politics or fighting. A gentle man, wouldn't have kicked a dog from his front step."

"But his brother took up arms against Sulla, and died fighting him."

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"That was his brother, not Furius. I knew them both, from when they were boys growing up in that house with their mother. Furius was a peaceful child, and a cautious man. A philosopher, not a fighter. What was done to him was a terrible injustice—naming him an enemy of the state, taking all his property, cutting off his . . ." She stopped her sweeping and cleared her throat. She hardened her jaw. "And who are you? Another schemer come to torment his womenfolk?"

"Not at all."

"Because I'll tell you right now that you'll never get in to see his mother or sister. Ever since the death, and after that the old woman's stroke, they haven't stirred out of that house. A long time to be in mourning, you might say, but Furius was all they had. His widow goes out to do the marketing, with the little girl; but she still wears black. They all took his death very hard."

At that moment the door across the street opened. A blonde woman emerged, draped in a black stola. Beside her, reaching up to hold her hand, was a little girl with haunted eyes and black curls. Closing the door and following behind was the giant, who saw me and scowled.

"On their way to market," whispered the old slavewoman. "She usually goes at this time of morning. Ah, look at the precious little one, so serious-looking yet so pretty. Not so much like her mother, not so fair; no, the very image of her aunt, I've always said."

"Her aunt? Not her father?"

"Him, too, of course . . ."

I talked with the old woman for a few moments, then hurried after the widow. I hoped for a chance to speak with her, but the bodyguard made it quite plain that I should keep my distance. I fell back and followed them in secret, observing her purchases as she did her shopping in the meat market.

At last I broke away and headed for the house on the Palatine.

Lucius and Cornelia hurried to the atrium even before the slave announced my arrival. Their faces were drawn with sleeplessness and worry.

"The lemur appeared again last night," said Lucius.

"The thing was in my bedchamber." Cornelia's face was pale. "I woke to see it standing beside the door. It must have been the smell

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that woke me—a horrible, fetid stench! I tried to rise and couldn't. I wanted to cry out, but my throat was frozen—the thing cast a spell on me. It said the words again: *Now You.* Then it disappeared into the hallway."

"Did you pursue it?"

She looked at me as if I were mad.

"But *I* saw the thing," offered Lucius. "I was in the bedchamber down the hall. I heard footsteps, and called out, thinking it might be Cornelia. There was no answer and the footsteps grew hurried. I leaped from my couch and stepped into the hall. . . ."

"And you saw it?"

"Only for an instant. I called out. The thing paused and turned, then disappeared into the shadows. I would have followed it—really, Gordianus, I swear I would have—but at that instant Cornelia cried out for me. I turned and hurried to her room."

"So the thing fled, and no one pursued it." I stifled a curse.

"I'm afraid so," said Lucius, wincing. "But when the thing turned and looked at me in the hallway, a bit of moonlight fell on its face."

"You had a good look at it, then?"

"Yes. Gordianus, I didn't know Furius well, but I had some dealings with him before his death, enough to recognize him across a street or in the Forum. And this creature—despite its broken teeth and the tumors on its flesh—this fiend most certainly bore the face of Furius!"

Cornelia suddenly gasped and began to stagger. Lucius held her up and called for help. Some of the household women gathered and escorted her to her bedchamber.

"Titus was just the same before his fall," sighed Lucius, shaking his head. "He began to faint and suffer fits, would suddenly lose his breath and be unable to catch another. They say such afflictions are frequently caused by spiteful lemures."

"Perhaps," I said. "Or by a guilty conscience. I wonder if the lemur left any other manifestations behind? Show me where you saw the thing."

Lucius led me down the hallway. "There," he said, pointing to a spot a few paces beyond the door to his room. "At night a bit of light falls just there; everything beyond is dark."

I walked to the place and looked about, then sniffed the air. Lucius sniffed as well. "The smell of putrefaction," he murmured. "The lemur has left its fetid odor behind."

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"A bad smell, to be sure," I said, "but not the odor of a corpse. Look here! A footprint!"

Just below us, two faint brown stains in the shape of sandals had been left on the tiled floor. In the bright morning light other marks of the same color were visible extending in both directions. Those toward Cornelia's bedchamber, where many other feet had traversed, quickly became confused and unreadable. Those leading away showed only the imprint of the forefeet of a pair of sandals, with no heel marks.

"The thing came to a halt here, just as you said. Then it began to run, leaving only these abbreviated impressions. Why should a lemur run on tiptoes, I wonder? And what is this stain left by the footsteps?"

I knelt down and peered closely. Lucius, shedding his patrician dignity, got down on his hands and knees beside me. He wrinkled his nose. "The smell of putrefaction!" he said again.

"Not putrefaction," I countered. "Common excrement. Come, let's see where the footprints lead."

We followed them down the hallway and around a corner, where the footprints ended before a closed door.

"Does this lead outside?" I asked.

"Why, no," said Lucius, suddenly a patrician again and making an uncomfortable face. "That door opens into the indoor toilet."

"How interesting." I opened it and stepped inside. As I would have expected in a household run by a woman like Cornelia, the fixtures were luxurious and the place was quite spotless, except for some telltale footprints on the limestone floor. There were windows set high in the wall, covered by iron bars. A marble seat surmounted the hole. Peering within, I studied the lead piping of the drain.

"Straight down the slope of the Palatine Hill and into the Cloaca Maxima, and thence into the Tiber," commented Lucius. Patricians may be prudish about bodily functions, but of Roman plumbing they are justifiably proud.

"Not nearly large enough for a man to pass through," I said.

"What an awful idea!"

"Even so . . ." I called for a slave, who managed to find a chisel for me.

"Now what are you doing? Here, those tiles are made of fine limestone, Gordianus! You shouldn't go chipping away at the corners."

"Not even to discover *this?*" I slid the chisel under the edge of one of the stones and lifted it up.

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Lucius drew back and gasped, then leaned forward and peered down into the darkness. "A tunnel!" he whispered.

"So it appears."

"Why, someone must go down it!" Lucius peered at me and raised an eyebrow.

"Not even if Cornelia doubled my fee!"

"I wasn't suggesting that *you* go, Gordianus." He looked up at the young slave who had fetched the chisel. The boy looked slender and supple enough. When he saw what Lucius intended, he started back and looked at me imploringly.

"No, Lucius Claudius," I said, "no one need be put at risk; not yet. Who knows what the boy might encounter—if not lemures and monsters, then boobytraps or scorpions or a fall to his death. First we should attempt to determine the tunnel's egress. It may be a simple matter, if it merely follows the logical course of the plumbing."

Which it did. From the balcony on the western side of the house, it was easy enough to judge where the buried pipes descended the slope into the valley between the Palatine and the Capitoline, where they joined with the Cloaca Maxima underground. At the foot of the hill, directly below the house, in a wild rubbish-strewn region behind some warehouses and granaries, I spied a thicket. Even stripped of their leaves, the bushes grew so thick that I could not see far into them.

Lucius insisted on accompanying me, though his bulky frame and expensive garb were ill-suited for traversing a rough hillside. We reached the foot of the hill and pushed our way into the thicket, ducking beneath branches and snapping twigs out of the way.

At last we came to the heart of the thicket, where our perseverance was rewarded. Hidden behind the dense, shaggy branches of a cypress tree was the tunnel's other end. The hole was crudely made, lined with rough dabs of cement and broken bricks. It was just large enough for a man to enter, but the foul smell that issued from within was enough to keep vagrants or even curious children out.

At night, hidden behind the storehouses and sheds, such a place would be quite lonely and secluded. A man—or a lemur, for that matter—might come and go completely unobserved.

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"Cold," complained Lucius, "cold and damp and dark. It would have made more sense to stay in the house tonight, where it's warm and dry. We could lie in wait in the hallway and trap this fiend when he emerges from his secret passage. Why, instead, are we huddling here in the dark and cold, watching for who-knows-what and jumping in fright every time a bit of wind whistles through the thicket?"

"You need not have come, Lucius Claudius. I didn't ask you to."

"Cornelia would have thought me a coward if I didn't," he pouted.

"And what does Cornelia's opinion matter?" I snapped, and bit my tongue. The cold and damp had set us both on edge. A light drizzle began to fall, obscuring the moon and casting the thicket into even greater darkness. We had been hiding among the brambles since shortly after nightfall. I had warned Lucius that the watch was likely to be long and uncomfortable and possibly futile, but he had insisted on accompanying me. He had offered to hire some ruffians to escort us, but if my suspicions were correct we would not need them; nor did I want more witnesses to be present than was necessary.

A gust of icy wind whipped beneath my cloak and sent a shiver up my spine. Lucius's teeth began to chatter. My mood grew dark. What if I was wrong, after all? What if the thing we sought was not human, but something else . . .

"And as for jumping in fear every time a twig snaps," I whispered, "speak for yourself—"

I fell silent, for at that moment not one but many twigs began to snap. Something large had entered the thicket and was moving toward us.

"It must be a whole army!" whispered Lucius, clutching at my arm.

"No," I whispered back. "Only two persons, if my guess is right."

Two moving shapes, obscured by the tangle of branches and the deep gloom, came very near to us and then turned aside, toward the cypress tree that hid the tunnel's mouth.

A moment later I heard a man's voice, cursing: "Someone has blocked the hole!" I recognized the voice of the growling giant who guarded the house on the Caelian Hill.

"Perhaps the tunnel has fallen in." When Lucius heard the second voice he clutched my arm again, not in fear but surprise.

"No," I said aloud, "the tunnel was purposely blocked so that you could not use it again."

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There was a moment of silence, followed by the noise of two bodies scrambling in the underbrush.

"Stay where you are!" I said. "For your own good, stay where you are and listen to me!"

The scrambling ceased and there was silence again, except for the sound of heavy breathing and confused whispers.

"I know who you are," I said. "I know why you've come here. I have no interest in harming you, but I must speak with you. Will you speak with me, Furia?"

"Furia?" whispered Lucius. The drizzle had ended, and moonlight illuminated the confusion on his face.

There was a long silence, then more whispering—the giant was trying to dissuade his mistress. Finally she spoke out. "Who are you?" she said.

"My name is Gordianus. You don't know me. But I know that you and your family have suffered greatly, Furia. You have been wronged, most unjustly. Perhaps your vengeance on Titus and Cornelia is seemly in the eyes of the gods—I cannot judge. But you have been found out, and the time has come to stop your pretense. I'll step toward you now. There are two of us. We bear no weapons. Tell your faithful slave that we mean no harm, and that to harm us will profit you nothing."

I stepped slowly toward the cypress tree, a great, shaggy patch of black amid the general gloom. Beside it stood two forms, one tall, the other short.

With a gesture, Furia bade her slave to stay where he was, then she stepped toward us. A patch of moonlight fell on her face. Lucius gasped and started back. Even though I expected it, the sight still sent a shiver through my veins.

I confronted what appeared to be a young man in a tattered cloak. His short hair was matted with blood and blood was smeared all around his throat and neck, as if his neck had been severed and then somehow fused together again. His eyes were dark and hollow. His skin was as pale as death and dotted with horrible tumors, his lips were parched and cracked. When Furia spoke, her sweet, gentle voice was a strange contrast to her horrifying visage.

"You have found out," she said.

"Yes."

"Are you the man who called at my mother's house this morning?"

"Yes."

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"Who betrayed me? It couldn't have been Cleto," she whispered, glancing at the bodyguard.

"No one betrayed you. We found the tunnel this afternoon."

"Ah! My brother had it built during the worst years of the civil war, so that we might have a way to escape in a sudden crisis. Of course, when the monster became dictator, there was no way for anyone to escape."

"Was your brother truly an enemy of Sulla's?"

"Not in any active way, but there were those willing to paint him as such—those who coveted all he had."

"Furius was proscribed for no reason?"

"No reason but the bitch's greed!" Her voice was hard and bitter. I glanced at Lucius, who was curiously silent at such an assault on Cornelia's character.

"It was Titus whom you haunted first—"

"Only so that Cornelia would know what awaited her. Titus was a weakling, a nobody, easily frightened. Ask Cornelia; she frightened him into doing anything she wished, even if it meant destroying an innocent colleague from his younger days. It was Cornelia who convinced her dear cousin Sulla to insert my brother's name in the proscription lists, merely to obtain our house. Because the men of our line have perished, because Furius was the last, she thought that her calumny would go unavenged forever."

"But now it must stop, Furia. You must be content with what you have done so far."

"No!"

"A life for a life," I said. "Titus for Furius."

"No, ruin for ruin! The death of Titus will not restore our house, our fortune, our good name."

"Nor will the death of Cornelia. If you proceed now, you are sure to be caught. You must be content with half a portion of vengeance, and push the rest aside."

"You intend to tell her, then? Now that you've caught me at it?"

I hesitated. "First, tell me truly, Furia, did you push Titus from his balcony?"

She looked at me unwaveringly, the moonlight making her eyes glimmer like shards of onyx. "Titus jumped from the balcony. He jumped because he thought he saw the lemur of my brother, and he could not stand his own wretchedness and guilt."

I bowed my head. "Go," I whispered. "Take your slave and go now, back to your mother and your niece and your brother's widow. Never come back."

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I looked up to see tears streaming down her face. It was a strange sight, to see a lemur weep. She called to the slave, and they departed from the thicket.

We ascended the hill in silence. Lucius stopped chattering his teeth and instead began to huff and puff. Outside Cornelia's house I drew him aside.

"Lucius, you must not tell Cornelia."

"But how else—"

"We will tell her that we found the tunnel but that no one came, that her persecutor has been frightened off for now, but may come again, in which case she can set her own guard. Yes, let her think that the unknown threat is still at large, always plotting her destruction."

"But surely she deserves—"

"She deserves what Furia had in store for her. Did you know Cornelia had placed Furius's name on the lists, merely to obtain his house?"

"I—" Lucius bit his lips. "I suspected the possibility. But Gordianus, what she did was hardly unique. Everyone was doing it."

"Not everyone. Not you, Lucius."

"True," he said, nodding sheepishly. "But Cornelia will fault you for not capturing the imposter. She'll refuse to pay the full fee."

"I don't care about the fee."

"I'll make up the difference," said Lucius.

I laid my hand on his shoulder. "What is rarer than a camel in Gaul?" Lucius wrinkled his brow. I laughed. "An honest man in Rome."

Lucius shrugged off the compliment with typical chagrin. "I still don't understand how you knew the identity of the imposter."

"I told you that I visited the house on the Caelian Hill this morning. What I didn't tell you was that the old slavewoman across the street revealed to me that Furius not only had a sister, but that this sister was the same age—his twin—and bore a striking resemblance to him."

"Ah! They must have been close, and her slightly softer features make her look younger than Furius."

"Who must have been quite handsome. Even through her horrid makeup . . ." I sighed. "Also, when I followed Furius's widow to mar-

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ket, I was struck by her purchase of a quantity of calf's blood. She also gathered a spray of juniper berries, which the little girl carried for her."

"Berries?"

"The cankers pasted on Furia's face—juniper berries cut in half. The blood was for matting her hair and daubing on her neck. As for the rest of her appearance, her ghastly makeup and costuming, you and I can only guess at the ingenuity of a household of women united toward a single goal. Furia has been in seclusion for months, which explains the almost uncanny paleness of her flesh—and the fact that she was able to cut off her hair without anyone taking notice."

I shook my head. "A remarkable woman. I wonder why she never married? The turmoil and confusion of the civil war, I suppose, and the death of her brothers ruined her prospects forever. Misery is like a pebble cast into a pond, sending out a wave that spreads and spreads."

I headed home that night weary and wistful. There are days when one sees too much of the world's wickedness, and only a long sleep in the safe seclusion of one's home can restore an appetite for life. I thought of Bethesda and Eco, and tried to push the face of Furia from my thoughts. The last thing on my mind was the haunted soldier and his legion of lemures, and yet I was destined to encounter them all before I reached my house.

I passed by the wall of his garden, smelled the familiar tang of burning leaves, but thought no more about the soldier until I heard the little wooden door open behind me and the voice of his old retainer crying out my name.

"Thank the gods you've finally returned!" he whispered hoarsely. He seemed to be in the grip of a strange malady or spell, for even though the door allowed him more room to stand, he remained oddly bent, his eyes gleamed dully, and his jaw was slack. "The master has sent messenger after messenger to your door—always they are told you are out, that your return is expected at any moment. But when the lemures come, time stops. Please, come! Save the master—save us all!"

From beyond the wall I heard the sound of moaning, not from one man but from many. I heard a woman shriek, and the sound of

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furniture overturned. What madness was taking place within the house?

"Please, help us! The lemures, the lemures!" The old slave made a face of such horror that I started back and turned to make my escape. My house was only a few steps up the pathway. But I turned back. I reached inside my tunic and felt for the handle of my dagger before I thought how little use a dagger would be to deal with those already dead.

It took no small amount of courage to step through the little door. My heart pounded like a hammer in my chest.

The air within was dank and smoky. After the brief drizzle a clammy cold had descended upon the hills of Rome, such as holds down plumes of smoke and makes the air unwholesome and stagnant. I breathed in an acrid breath and coughed.

The soldier came running from within the house. He tripped and staggered forward on his knees, wrapped his arms around my waist and looked up at me in abject terror. "There!" He pointed back toward the house. "They pursue me! Gods have mercy—the boy without a head, the soldier with his belly cut open, all the others!"

I peered into the hazy darkness, but saw nothing except a bit of whorling smoke. I suddenly felt dizzy and lightheaded. It was because I had not eaten all day, I told myself; I should have been less proud and presumed upon Cornelia's hospitality for a meal. Then, while I watched, the whorl of smoke began to expand and change shape. A face emerged from the murky darkness—a boy's face, twisted with agony.

"See!" cried the soldier. "See how the poor lad holds his own head in his fist, like Perseus holding the head of the Gorgon! See how he stares, blaming me!"

Indeed, out of the darkness and smoke I began to see exactly what the wretched man described, a headless boy in battle garb clutching his dismembered head by the hair and holding it aloft. I opened my mouth in awe and terror. Behind the boy, other shapes began to emerge—first a few, then many, then a legion of phantoms covered with blood and writhing like maggots in the air.

It was a terrifying spectacle. I would have fled, but I was rooted to the spot. The soldier clutched my knees. The old slave began to weep and babble. From within the house came the sound of others in distress, moaning and crying out.

"Don't you hear them?" cried the soldier. "The lemures, shrieking like harpies!" The great looming mass of corpses began to keen and wail—surely all of Rome could hear it!

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Like a drowning man, the mind in great distress will clutch at anything to save itself. A bit of straw will float, but will not support a thrashing man; a plank of wood may give him respite, but best of all is a steady rock within the raging current. So my mind clutched at anything that might preserve it in the face of such overwhelming and inexplicable horror. Time had come to a stop, just as the old slave had said, and in that endlessly attenuated moment a flood of images, memories, schemes, and notions raged through my mind. I clutched at straws. Madness pulled me downward, like an unseen current in black water. I sank—until I suddenly found the rock for which I sought.

"The bush!" I whispered. "The burning bush, which speaks aloud!"

The soldier, thinking I spied something within the mass of writhing lemures, clutched at me and trembled. "What bush? Ah yes, I see it, too . . ."

"No, the bush here in your garden! That strange, gnarled tree among the yews, with yellow leaves all around. But now the leaves have all been swept in among the others . . . burnt with the others in the brazier . . . the smoke still hangs in the air . . ."

I pulled the soldier out of the garden, through the small door, and onto the pathway. I returned for the old slave, and then, one by one, for the others. They huddled together on the cobblestones, trembling and confused, their eyes wide with terror and red with blood.

"There are no lemures!" I whispered hoarsely, my throat sore from the smoke—even though I could see them hovering over the wall, cackling and dangling their entrails in the empty air.

The slaves pointed and clutched one another. The soldier hid behind his hands.

As the slaves grew more manageable, I led them in groups to my house, where they huddled together, frightened but safe. Bethesda was perplexed and displeased at the sudden invasion of half-mad strangers, but Eco was delighted at the opportunity to stay up until dawn under such novel circumstances. It was a long, cold night, marked by fits of panic and orgies of mutual reassurance, while we waited for sanity to return.

The first light of morning broke, bringing a cold dew that was a tonic to senses still befuddled by sleeplessness and poisoned by smoke. My head pounded like thunder, with a hangover far worse

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than any I had ever gotten from wine. A ray of pale sunlight was like a knife to my eyes, but I no longer saw visions of lemures or heard their mad shrieking.

The soldier, haggard and dazed, begged me for an explanation. I agreed readily enough, for a wise man once taught me that the best relief for a pounding headache is the application of disciplined thought, which brings blood to the brain and flushes evil humors from the phlegm.

"It came to me in a flash of inspiration, not logic," I explained. "Your autumnal ritual of burning leaves, and the yearly visitation of the lemures . . . the smoke that filled your garden, and the plague of spirits . . . these things were not unconnected. That odd, twisted tree in your garden is not native to Rome, or to the peninsula. How it came here, I have no idea, but I suspect it came from the East, where plants which induce visions are quite common. There is the snake plant of Aethiopia, the juice of which causes such terrible visions that it drives men to suicide; men guilty of sacrilege are forced to drink it as a punishment. The rivergleam plant that grows on the banks of the Indus is also famous for making men rave and see weird visions. But I suspect that the tree in your garden may be a specimen of a rare bush found in the rocky mountains east of Egypt. Bethesda tells a tale about it."

"What tale?" said Bethesda.

"You remember—the tale your Hebrew father passed on to you, about his ancestor called Moses, who encountered a bush that spoke aloud to him when it burned. The leaves of your bush, neighbor, not only spoke but cast powerful visions."

"Yet why did I see what I saw?"

"You saw that which you feared the most—the vengeful spirits of those you killed fighting for Sulla."

"But the slaves saw what I saw! And so did you!"

"We saw what you suggested, just as you began to see a burning bush when I said the words."

He shook his head. "It was never so powerful before. Last night was more terrible than ever!"

"Probably because, in the past, you happened to burn only a few of the yellow leaves at a time, and the cold wind carried away much of the smoke; the visions came upon some but not all of the household, and in varying degrees. But last night the smoke hovered in the garden and the haze spread through the house; and perhaps you happened to burn a great many of the yellow leaves at once. Every-

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one who breathed the smoke was intoxicated and stricken with a kind of madness. Once we escaped the smoke, with time the madness passed, like a fever burning itself out."

"Then the lemures never existed?"

"I think not."

"And if I uproot that accursed bush and cast it in the Tiber, I will never see the lemures again?"

"Perhaps not," I said. *Though you may always see them in your nightmares,* I thought.

"So, it was just as I told you," said Bethesda, bringing a cool cloth to lay upon my forehead that afternoon. Flashes of pain still coursed through my temples from time to time, and whenever I closed my eyes alarming visions loomed in the blackness.

"Just as you told me? Nonsense!" I said. "You thought that Titus was pushed from his balcony—and that his wife Cornelia did it!"

"A woman pretending to be a lemur drove him to jump—which is just the same," she insisted.

"And you said the soldier's old slave was lying about having seen the lemures himself, when in fact he was telling the truth."

"What I said was that the dead cannot go walking about unless they have been properly mummified, and I was absolutely right. And it was I who once told you about the burning bush that speaks, remember? Without that, you never would have figured the cause."

"Fair enough," I admitted, deciding it was impossible to win the argument.

"This quaint Roman idea about lemures haunting the living is completely absurd," she went on.

"About that I am not sure."

"But with your own eyes you have seen the truth! By your own wits you have proved in two instances that what everyone thought to be lemures were not lemures at all, only makeup and fear, intoxicating smoke and guilty consciences!"

"You miss the point, Bethesda."

"What do you mean?"

"Lemures *do* exist—perhaps not as visitors perceptible to the senses, but in another way. The dead do have power to spread misery among the living. The spirit of a man can carry on and cause untold havoc from beyond the grave. The more powerful the man, the more

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terrible his legacy." I shivered—not at lurid visions remembered from the soldier's garden, but at the naked truth, which was infinitely more concrete and terrible. "Rome is a haunted city. The lemur of the dictator Sulla haunts us all. Dead he may be, but not departed. His wickedness lingers on, bringing despair and suffering upon his friends and foes alike."

To this Bethesda had no answer. I closed my eyes and saw no more monsters, but slept a dreamless sleep until dawn of the following day.

DETECTIVERSE

SORE LOSER

by SEYMOUR KAPETANSKY

He went to jail for stealing purses
With painful bruises he still nurses;
Caught sneaking bags from out the hall,
He learned he'd crashed the Black Belts' Ball!

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Congratulations are due to Robert Barnard for his nomination for the 1991 Agatha Award for best short story. Mr. Barnard's story, "The Habit of Widowhood" (November, 1991), is one of three EQMM *contenders for the award, which is intended to recognize merit in the field of the traditional, or "cozy," mystery story. ("The Crime of Miss Oyster Brown" by Peter Lovesey and "Long Live the Queen" by Ruth Rendell were also named.) Here he is with another entertaining offering about a fantasy with very real consequences . . .*

MY SON, MY SON

by ROBERT BARNARD

Leonard Parkin planned the birth of his son for the seventeenth of October. He was going down to London for a management conference on the sixteenth, and there was a social event of the usual dreary kind in the evening, which he decided to leave early so as to enjoy all the exciting terror of the beginning of labour. The main conference was in the morning, but the afternoon was free and he was not planning to take the train home to Peterborough until after the evening rush hour. John Julian would be born in the afternoon.

At the evening reception, held in an anonymous hotel on the fringes of Bloomsbury, Len was rather abstracted, but in the general atmosphere of wine fumes and grabs for the canapés nobody noticed. They didn't notice either when he first slipped away to the Gentlemen's, then left the hotel altogether. Len was liked, but he wasn't much noticed.

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Back in the Great Northern, his usual hotel, Len put the chain on his door and lay happily on his bed. Bliss! He wondered whether to crack the little bottle of champagne in the room fridge, but he decided that champagne wasn't right, not for the labour. He would have a bottle of white wine later. What he wanted now was just to lie back on his bed and imagine it.

Marian, after all those months, feeling the first pains. The look she gave him, the certainty in her eyes and in his. "I think it's starting"—those time-honoured words which would grant Marian kinship with the millions of other women who had used them. What would he do? He would go over and kiss her tenderly on the forehead, then he would run to the telephone and ring the well-rehearsed number. The waiting, the waiting! Another terrible pain, just as he saw the flashing light of the ambulance drawing up outside.

He went with her, of course, the two of them silent in the back, he letting her grip his hand tighter and tighter as the agony came, receded, then came again. Then the arrival at the hospital, the stretchered rush to the maternity ward, he always by her side.

He lay there for two hours, picturing the scene, filling in small details, living through Marian's pain and her thrilled anticipation, being there with him beside her. Then he got up and poured himself some wine. It was good, but somehow as he drank the scene became less vivid. Natural, of course, but disappointing. He wouldn't have a drink tomorrow. He needed to be at his most alert tomorrow.

After the morning's business, all the representatives at the conference for people in the confectionary business were free to do what they pleased, and they all dispersed to boozy gatherings in pubs, on shopping sprees to Harrod's and Oxford Street, or on unspecified business in Soho. Leonard went to Hyde Park and lay under a tree in the sun. There his mind winged him back effortlessly to the maternity ward, and to himself sitting there by Marian, helping her through her labour. In real life, he suspected, he would have refused to be there with his wife, or been there only reluctantly, being faint-hearted about that sort of thing. But in his imagination he could make the labour terrible but short, and he could cut to the magical moment when the baby was born, to his touching it, blotchy and screaming, to his seeing it for the first time in Marian's arms—no, not it, but *him*, John Julian Parkin, his son and heir.

The day was sunny and he lay there, rapturous, ecstatic, more intensely alive than he had ever been. For hours he lay savouring the sensations: the sound, the smell, the touch of his newborn son.

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Then he walked all the way to the station, got his case out of Left Luggage and caught the train home. On the hour's journey he invented little embellishments, made more vivid the picture of his son's face. It had been a perfect day.

It was late when he finally got home, and Marian was preparing the supper.

"Have a good conference?" she asked.

"Very good indeed," he said, kissing her, feeling a sudden spurt of love for his practical, commonsensical, infertile wife. The strongest feeling in her down-to-earth heart was her passionate love for him, made poignant by her inability to have children. He could never share the birth of their son with her. Her incomprehension would have killed him stone dead.

John Julian grew apace in the months that followed, but no quicker than a natural child would have. Leonard was strict about that. As he grew his picture became sharper in his father's mind: how much hair he had at birth, and what colour it was; how quickly he acquired more; the precise shape of his snub nose; how he looked when he smiled. Naturally there were setbacks and worries: Len would sometimes enliven a long car journey on business by imagining bouts of colic or the worries of teething. The great landmark joys he usually kept for some business trip which would involve a night away from home. Then, as on that first occasion, he would slip away as early as he decently could from whatever function or meeting he was obliged to attend, shut himself in his hotel room and recreate his mental world around the son that had been born to him. The pictures were so vivid—of Marian breast-feeding their boy, of his first words and first tentative steps—that they became part of his existence, the most cherished part.

Sometimes it was quite difficult to make the transition from the imaginary to the real world. He would come through his front door with memories still crowding around him and expect to see Marian cradling John Julian in her arms, or playing with him on the floor by the fire. Then he would have to drag himself down to earth and enquire about her day rather than John Julian's, tell her what he'd been doing, not what he'd been imagining. For Marian remained the common-sense, slightly drab woman who reserved her greatest intensity for their love-making, while the Marian of his imagination had blossomed with motherhood, had become altogether more sophisticated and curious about the world. She had given up her job in the chain store to be with their boy, but Len never resented

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sharing him with her because certain times and certain duties were by common agreement his and his alone.

He was a healthy boy, that was a blessing. He played well with the other children in the street, and on the one morning in the week when he went to play-group, the leader commented on his nice disposition. Len started to imagine futures for him, though all the time with the proviso in his mind that of course John Julian would do exactly what he wanted to do when the time came for him to choose. He was an active, open-air child, but Len didn't want him to be a professional athlete. It was too short and too limiting a life. But he'd be a very good amateur. Len always said when the Olympic Games were on that it was a pity the facilities weren't used afterwards for a Games for *real* amateurs. Perhaps by the time John Julian was a young man they would be, and he would compete—maybe as a middle-distance runner, or perhaps a pole-vaulter.

His real work would surely be something where he could use his brain. There was no disputing that he had one, he was so forward. Len didn't fancy his becoming a doctor, as so many parents hoped for their children, and certainly he didn't want a surgeon son. Still, he would like something that involved a degree of prestige. He finally settled on Oxford and a science degree, with a fellowship to follow, and a succession of brilliant research projects.

But that was what he hoped for. The boy's future was for him to decide, though he knew John Julian would want to talk it through with both his parents before he made his decision.

Meanwhile there was a real highlight in his life coming up: his first day at school. Marian had agreed—the Marian in his mind had agreed—that he should take him on his first day. She would be taking him day in, day out after that, she said: that would be her pleasure. It was only right that Len should have the joy of the first day. One of the firm's confectionary factories was near Scarborough, and Len usually visited it once a year. He arranged to go in early September—Tuesday the fourth, the day that school started for five-year-olds in his area. He booked a good hotel in the upper part of the town, near where Anne Brontë had died, and he went off with a head brimming with happy anticipation.

He got through the inspection and consultations well enough. He had had to train himself over the past five years not to be abstracted, not to give only half his attention to matters of that kind: after all, it would never do for John Julian's father to be out of a job. When he was asked by one of the local managers to dinner with him and

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his wife that evening, Len said with every appearance of genuine regret that unfortunately he was engaged to visit "a relative of the wife's." In fact, when the day's work was done, he went back to the hotel, then took the funicular railway down to the sands. In a rapturous walk along the great stretch of beach he imagined what his day would have been.

John Julian was excited, of course. Immensely excited. He had dressed himself and was down to breakfast by half past seven, and when his mother and father smiled at his enthusiasm he said that he had to pack his schoolbag, though in fact he had done it the night before, and packed and unpacked it for days before that. When they set out from the front door Leonard was immensely touched when John Julian reached up and took his hand, conscious that he needed guidance and protection at this great moment of his life. At the gate he turned to wave to Mummy at the door, then took Len's hand again for the ten minutes' walk to school, sometimes shouting to friends of his own age who were also with their parents on their first day of school. At the school gate John Julian looked up at his father to say as clearly as if he'd used words: "You *will* come in as you promised, won't you?" So Len went in, as most of the parents did, knowing the new children's classroom from the introductory tour the week before. Soon the children were mingling, playing, and discovering their new world, and the parents, with conspiratorial glances at each other, could slip away. The wind buffeted Len's face as he walked back to the funicular and thought what a wrench it was to leave him, and what a happiness to walk home with some of the other parents, talking parents' talk, swapping tales of achievements and setbacks, hopes and prospects.

Back in the hotel room, Len imagined his day, going over things with Marian, wondering what John Julian was doing, speculating whether he was getting on well with his teacher ("She seemed such a nice woman"). As with most parents, such speculation was endless and self-feeding, and Len decided to save the fetching of his son from school as a delicious treat for next day.

His work at the factory, his talk in the canteen, was despatched with his usual efficiency. By late afternoon he was on the train to York, and then on the Inter-City Peterborough, gazing sightlessly at the rolling English countryside. His son had run into his arms at the school gates, almost incoherent in his anxiety to tell his father everything about his day. Len had sat him on the wall of the playground to give him a few minutes to get his breath and tell him all

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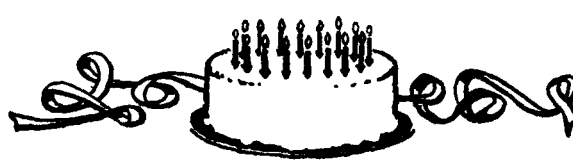
the most vital points. Then they had walked home hand in hand, John Julian still chattering nineteen to the dozen as he retrieved from his memory more facts and encounters of vital interest in his young life. Marian was waiting at the door and the whole thing was to do again—all the day's events recounted, all the jumble of impressions and opinions rolled out again for her.

Marian in fact was not at home when he got in. She was still at her night-school class in nineteenth-century history. Len made himself a sandwich, poured a glass of milk, and sat by the kitchen table gazing out at the twilit garden, smiling to himself as he went through the excitements and joys of his day. He did not hear his wife let herself in through the front door. He did not realize she stood for some moments watching him as he sat there smiling contentedly. He was conscious only of a movement behind him as she snatched the breadknife from the table, and very conscious of pain as the knife went into his back.

Later, in the police station, her face raddled with tears of grief and guilt, Marian could only sob out over and over: "I knew he'd found another woman. I'd known it for months. He was so happy!"



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How to Plan a **MURDER.**

White-knuckled hands clutched the knife. Nine long years of torture were about to come to a close. It was perfect. But somewhere, way back in the farthest recesses of my mind, I quailed. Something wasn't quite right. Wasn't this the moment I'd dreamed of for the last nine years? And wasn't that my nemesis sleeping a scant four feet away? A sudden tide of bitterness rose inside me. It was the perfect crime. There was no way I'd ever be caught. But still, there were nagging doubts. Something wasn't quite right. What was it? The motive was there - this man had killed my brother. The weapon was there, too. No, it wasn't either one of those. What was the matter with me? Why couldn't I just kill the man? Time was running out, the sun would rise in a mere three hours. But still I waited, deep in thought. Suddenly, I knew why I couldn't commit this crime. I knew what was keeping me locked in a deadly debate with my mind: I'd lost my angle. Not the angle on my knife, the angle on my writing.

I should have seen it from the start. My scope was too broad, my focus was fuzzy, my slant wasn't slanted, and my style wasn't stylish. How could I commit the perfect crime with this kind of writing? I didn't need a better motive. I needed the Palmer Writers School.

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado *story* by

EDWARD D. HOCH

With so many changes taking place in Eastern Europe, the adventures of Michael Vlado carry a special interest, for the author has carefully researched the changing social environment, particularly in post-Ceausescu Romania, and how the Gypsy tribes are being affected. This episode finds Vlado in search of a mysterious, three-eyed statue that appears to be the key to a murder investigation . . .

THE IRON ANGEL

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Michael Vlado's Gypsy village in the foothills of the Carpathians had remained free, so far, of the turmoil that had swept through much of Romania since the collapse of the Socialist government. In many communities Gypsies had died, or been driven away, and Michael had intensified efforts to find a new home for his people. But as spring returned to the Carpathians all seemed well for a time.

Even Michael's old friend Segar, once a captain in the government militia and now an official of the transition government, had taken to driving up to the village of Gravita as he had done so often in the old days. That was why Michael saw nothing unusual in his arrival that April morning when the horses were out in the field and the first of the spring flowers had blossomed.

"Good morning, Captain. A nice day for a ride in the hills!"

Segar smiled. Though he no longer wore his old uniform, he still liked being addressed as Captain. "My visit is not entirely one of pleasure," he admitted. "Do you remember an American girl named

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Jennifer Beatty? She rode up here on a motorcycle and stayed a few days."

Michael nodded. "It was at the time the old king was murdered and I took over the leadership of my tribe. How could I forget? I've wondered sometimes whatever happened to that girl. I hope she returned to her country."

"Unfortunately, no," Segar told him, looking off into the distance where the two mares were romping. "She's in Bucharest, and she seems to be involved in a killing. I thought you'd want to know."

"Is she accused of it?"

"Not yet. She'd been snorting heroin with some other young people, and she was a bit high at the time."

"Snorting heroin?"

"Drug addicts think it's safer than using contaminated needles."

Michael knew there was some reason for Segar's visit. "What do you want from me?"

"You were her friend for that brief period."

"More than three years ago."

"True, but she asked for you while being questioned. She won't talk to anyone else."

"You want me to return to Bucharest with you?"

"Yes, if you could follow me down in your car."

"I hate that city, even more so now for what they've done to my people."

"I think the worst of the oppression is over."

Michael shook his head. "Last week a small group of Gypsies passed through here from Poland, heading south. They told of gangs of young people wrecking the homes of wealthy Gypsies, trying to drive them from the country."

"I think the worst is over," Captain Segar repeated. "Return with me to Bucharest. You can help the girl and you can help me."

"Who was murdered?" Michael asked.

"A Gypsy."

The capital city had changed little since Michael's last visit. A few statues had been removed and the name of the late president, Ceausescu, was nowhere to be seen. Otherwise, the buildings were as Michael remembered them. He recognized the old militia headquarters at once as Segar turned into the parking garage connected to it. "This is our police headquarters now," his friend explained.

"Then you are back in police work?"

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Segar shrugged. "It is the only work I know."

He led the way up to his second-floor office, then picked up the telephone and issued a curt order for Jennifer Beatty to be brought in. He explained that she was being kept in a holding cell while they decided what to do with her. "The murdered man was a Gypsy named Jaroslaw Miawa. He was found stabbed to death in a cellar where Jennifer and some others were snorting heroin. She insists no one touched him, that he was wounded before coming there."

"Would that have been possible? What does your autopsy show?"

Before Segar could respond, the door opened and Jennifer Beatty was brought in. Michael remembered her as a young woman of twenty-two who'd stolen a motorcycle from her boyfriend and driven it into the foothills to hide from him. Now she was in her mid-twenties, though somehow she looked older. Her blonde hair was streaked with some sort of coloring and the healthy outdoors look he remembered was tarnished. Her eyes were tired and the lids sagged, though that might have been from a night without sleep. "Hello, Jennifer," he said, getting to his feet.

"You came! Thank God you came! Tell these people to release me." Her face seemed to come alive at the sight of him.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"You're the Gypsy king, aren't you?"

"These days in Romania that means even less than it did three years ago."

"I brought Michael Vlado as you requested," Segar told her. "Now you must give us a statement as you promised."

"I don't know. It's so confusing—"

"Could I speak with her alone?" Michael asked.

"All right," Segar agreed.

She reached out to touch his arm. "Wait. Do you have a cigarette?"

Segar took a pack from his pocket and gave them to her. "They're not American," he said apologetically.

"I'll smoke anything." She lit one and tried to relax as Segar left them alone in the little office.

"I was hoping you'd be back in America by now," Michael told her.

"I started back. I got sidetracked."

"How was that?"

She shrugged. "I decided to stop off at Switzerland for a few days. They had this park in Zurich where you could buy drugs legally and take them quite openly. The city government even supplied clean

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needles. I think they've stopped it now. The idea was to keep addicts in just one area of the city, but it didn't work too well."

"So you were back on drugs."

She nodded, drawing on the cigarette. "And before I knew it I was back here. I hooked up with a guy, and when I told him about Romania he wanted to see it. Travel is easier now, and there was no problem driving here from Zurich. We both had American passports."

"What happened to him?"

"He wanted drugs and he got arrested the first week we were here. I haven't seen him since. After that I fell in with a German named Conrad Rynox. I like him a lot. His crowd is into snorting heroin, which I'd never done before."

"Did you know the man who was killed?"

"Jarie. Jaroslaw Miawa. He hung around, liked to gamble. That's how he got money for the heroin."

Michael jotted down the name, asking her to spell it. Then, "Tell me what happened last night."

"We were in this cellar on Furtuna Street. When Jarie came in I could see he was hurt badly. Then we saw the blood. He'd been stabbed, more than once. He said a few words and then he just died there, on the cellar floor." Segar slipped back in while she talked.

"What did he say?"

"Something about an iron angel. The three eyes on the iron angel."

Michael glanced at Captain Segar. "Mean anything to you?"

Segar shook his head. "Nothing."

"Is there someplace in the city that has an iron angel—a park or a church, perhaps?"

"I don't know of any."

"You might try contacting the churches. There aren't that many of them anymore."

Segar nodded and made a note.

"What does the autopsy say about the dead man's wounds? How far could he have walked before collapsing?"

"We found no blood on the pavement outside, which is why we're questioning her further. He couldn't have gone too far after he was stabbed."

Michael Vlado nodded. "And you say he was a Gypsy? Did he have a family?"

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"A brother here in the city. The rest of the family moved west years ago."

"Do you really think Jennifer is involved?"

"We found her with the body."

"The others all ran away," she explained. "I stayed. He was my friend and I was hoping he was still alive."

"Will you release her?" Michael asked.

"Not now. Perhaps tomorrow, after the court hearing."

"She *stayed* with him, for God's sake! Would his killer have done that?"

"That argument will weigh in her favor," Segar conceded, "but the laws and the courts are different now. We must follow regulations to the letter. Here is the name and address of the victim's brother. If you can learn anything from the Gypsies, it could help her."

Michael had the unpleasant feeling that Segar had somehow recruited him to act as a detective. Either he was setting up Michael for some sort of trouble, or there was something about the case that Segar couldn't trust to his own assistants. Michael didn't like it, but maybe Jennifer Beatty deserved another chance.

The brother's name was Sigmund Miawa, and Michael found him in the morning at a Gypsy enclave by the edge of the city. He was tall for a Rom, with a fairness of skin that suggested mixed blood and intermarriage. He was a watchmaker, with a caravan that housed his wife Zorica and their child. It was a wonder that he continued to live as a Gypsy.

"It is a sad day for my family," he told Michael. "Perhaps you can honor us by taking part in the funeral service for my slain brother."

"Of course," Michael quickly agreed.

"To have a Gypsy king here, even a king from a neighboring tribe, would honor his memory."

"The police are trying to find who killed him."

"It was the drugs that killed him, whatever they say."

"As he was dying he spoke of the iron angel. What does that mean to you?"

"Nothing. A myth. I have heard men speak of worshiping at the iron angel, but I think it is only a saying."

"A saying not known in my hills. It is not a Rom saying."

"Nevertheless—"

"Your brother spoke of the three eyes of the iron angel."

"The Trinity, perhaps. It would be some sort of Christian symbol."

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Michael Vlado said no more until after the funeral. There was only a small group of mourners, Sigmund's family and a few others. It was explained that Jarie had not lived among them, that he had chosen the ways of the city. And his city friends, perhaps fearing the police, had not come to the funeral.

Jaroslaw Miawa was buried in an unmarked grave over the hill from the Gypsy enclave. As they walked back together, his brother explained, "Feelings against the Rom are at a high pitch right now. We fear the wild city youths might desecrate the graves if they found them. We know where he is buried, and when times are better I will place a marker there."

"You should go out into the countryside where the living is better," Michael suggested.

"I have never been a wanderer. My work is here, and I doubt if old Kurzbic could manage without me."

"He is your employer?"

Sigmund nodded. "I am not a Rom when I am at work. I do not have the typical features of a Gypsy and it is easy to pass as a Romanian. That is something my brother always resented. His Gypsy heritage was more obvious, and it kept him from the sort of job I have."

Sigmund Miawa used public transportation to go to work, and he was grateful when Michael offered him a ride. "I could not tell Old Kurzbic that my brother had died, or he would ask too many questions. I simply took off half a day."

The store where he worked as a watchmaker was near the center of the city on Calea Grivitei. Michael parked his car down the street and went into the shop with Sigmund. From the name "Old Kurzbic," he'd expected the store owner to be a man in his seventies, but Kurzbic could not have been more than sixty. He was balding and wore thick glasses, but showed no other sign of aging. His handshake was strong as he greeted Michael. "Welcome to my store. Feel free to look around."

In addition to jewelry, the small shop sold antique watches and clockwork mechanisms designed to amuse adults as well as children. "Whoever made these things?" Michael marveled, examining the miniature figure of a magician who waved his wand and produced answers to previously prepared questions.

"Such devices were popular in the late eighteenth century," Kurzbic explained. "Basically they were clockwork automatons, designed

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to perform any number of wondrous tasks. In a sense it was the golden age of the watchmaker's art."

"Do you sell them?"

"Some are worth a small fortune today, but only to collectors."

"You should guard these with care."

Kurzbic nodded. The reflection of the overhead lights danced off his thick glasses. "I am careful. Everything is locked up well at night, and I keep a gun behind the counter."

Michael glanced at the more modern watches and clocks, and then bid farewell to Sigmund and his employer. "One other thing," he asked Kurzbic. "Did you ever hear of something called the iron angel?"

The older man blinked. "A prize-fighter, wasn't he? Many years ago?"

"Said to have three eyes?"

"I believe so. One in the back of his head, they claimed, because he was so fast. The memory is vague but I think he was called the Iron Angel."

"That was the Iron Engine," Sigmund Miawa corrected from his worktable. "I remember going to see him in my youth. I think Ceausescu's government had him shot as a traitor because he refused to be part of the Olympic team."

Kurzbic nodded. "Iron Engine, Iron Angel—you may be right."

Michael left the shop and drove back to Captain Segar's office. The court hearing was over and Jennifer Beatty was waiting for him. "They said I can go," she told him.

He glanced at Segar. "Do you have any leads yet?"

"None. Here are the things from the dead man's pockets."

A shabby wallet with a few bills in it, some coins, a stubby pencil, a handkerchief, a key, and a folded piece of paper bearing the number 470. Michael looked them over, and saw little of interest. "What's the key for?"

"His apartment. It's in an old building a few blocks from where he was found. The address is in his wallet and we checked on it."

"He lived alone?"

"So far as we know."

"Is 470 his apartment number?"

"No. We don't know what that is."

Michael noticed the piece of paper was perforated along one edge, as if it had been torn from a notebook. "All right," he said to Jennifer. "Ready to go?"

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"I was ready yesterday."

He said goodbye to Segar and promised to call him later. Outside, he asked the American girl where she was living. She wiped her palms nervously against the sides of her jeans. "I've been staying with Conrad Rynox," she answered quietly.

"The leader of this little drug group?"

"He's very good to me," she answered defensively. "I love him."

He decided she was not really his responsibility. "All right, where does he live?"

"Furtuna Street. Across from the cellar where I was arrested."

"Tell me something," he said as they got into his car. "You knew Jarie Miawa. Did you ever see him with a knife?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"There wasn't one among his belongings. Most Gypsies carry knives, especially in a city like this. It might indicate he pulled it out to defend himself and dropped it when he was stabbed. Perhaps he wounded the killer with it."

"I never saw one," she said, looking away.

As they turned into Furtuna Street, he pulled up to the curb. "Jennifer, I have to ask if you're doing the right thing going back to this man Rynox. He's been supplying you with drugs, hasn't he?"

"Sometimes." She looked away. "I'm cutting down. Pretty soon I won't need them any more."

"I've known addicts before who said that. Come on, I want to meet Conrad Rynox."

She was reluctant at first to introduce them, but when Michael insisted she finally led the way into the apartment building. There was no elevator so they climbed five flights to the rooms she and Rynox shared. Michael hadn't known what to expect, but he shouldn't have been surprised to find a bearded man, apparently well into his thirties, asleep on the sofa in his underwear. He woke up when Jennifer shook him, and reached for her.

She danced away and announced, "We have a guest. Try to make yourself presentable, Conrad."

He sat up, bleary-eyed, making no effort to cover his hairy legs. "You come for some H?" he asked.

Michael shook his head. "I'm a friend of Jennifer's. I don't need any heroin, and neither does she."

Conrad Rynox, if that was his name, spoke German rather than Romanian. He picked up his wristwatch, shook it, then tossed it aside. "What time is it, Jenny?"

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"One-thirty. It's time you were up."

Michael could tell by his eyes and general manner that Conrad was still high on drugs, though he seemed reasonably coherent. "Do you know a man named Jarie Miawa?"

"Sure, I know Jarie—knew him, that is. He's dead, isn't he? Do I remember that right?"

"Yes, he's dead," Jennifer confirmed.

"Thought so. Came in bleeding like a stuck pig. That was last night, wasn't it?"

"Two nights ago. Everyone ran away and left me for the cops."

"I'm sorry, Jenny. I wasn't thinking straight."

"Jarie talked about the iron angel," Michael said. "Do you know about it?"

"Iron angel—sure! It's the answer to all problems, the fountain of youth, utopia."

"Does it exist? Have you seen it?"

"I've seen it, just once. It was like nothing else on earth, man! There were a half-dozen fires burning around it, and there it was, shrouded in smoke. We approached like worshipers one at a time, through the smoke, to peer into its three eyes and learn our destiny."

"Where can I find it, Conrad?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I think Jarie was stabbed there. Otherwise why was it on his dying lips? I need to find the killer, or else the police may arrest Jennifer again."

"It is nearby," he said. "But I'm not sure I could find it again. I'll try to find out where."

Michael could see there was no chance of learning more at the moment. "I'll be going now," he told Jennifer. "This is the hotel where I'm staying, and the phone number. Please call me if he learns anything."

"I will," she promised.

He went back downstairs. Glancing toward the end of Furtuna Street, where it intersected with Grivitei, he realized for the first time that he was just around the corner from the watchmaker's shop where the victim's brother worked. Sigmund was sitting behind the counter where Michael had left him only a couple of hours earlier.

"I thought of another question," he told Sigmund. "Is there somewhere we could talk?"

"There's a coffee house down the street." He turned toward Old Kurzbic at the rear of the store. "Can you handle things while I go for a cup of coffee?"

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"I handled them all morning," the shop owner grumbled.

"I won't be more than twenty minutes," Sigmund promised.

Over coffee Michael said, "Your employer didn't seem too pleased with your taking a break."

"Sometimes he feels sorry for himself. He knows more about the business than I ever will. I think he only hired me so he'd have someone to converse with. On days like today there aren't many customers." He took a sip of coffee. "But what was it you wanted to ask me?"

He repeated Conrad Rynox's description of the iron angel. "Did you ever hear anything like that before?"

He shook his head. "It sounds like a narcotic dream, all those smoky fires and the angel in the middle. It couldn't really exist, could it?"

"I don't know," Michael Vlado answered honestly. If this Gypsy didn't believe in the iron angel, why should he? "Do you know Conrad Rynox?"

"Slightly. He's an occasional customer at our shop."

"The number 470 was on a small paper in your brother's pocket. Could it be an address?"

"None that I know of." He thought about it. "That number would be about two blocks down from the cellar where his body was found. It wouldn't be connected."

"Connected? What do you mean?"

"In these old city blocks the building basements often run together. A person can enter on one street and exit through a building on a street around the corner."

"But 470 wouldn't be one of them, in any direction?"

"No. It would be too far away."

They finished their coffee and walked back to the shop. Kurzbic was behind the counter waiting on a customer with a damaged alarm clock. "I'll see you later," Michael told Sigmund, leaving him at the door.

He went back to where he'd left his car and was about to get in when a woman stepped from a doorway. Her clothing told him at once that she was a Gypsy, but at first he didn't recognize her.

"Michael Vlado!"

"Yes?"

"I am Zorica Miawa, Sigmund's wife. We met briefly at the funeral this morning."

"Of course. For a moment I didn't remember."

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"There was no reason why you should."

"I just left your husband. We had a cup of coffee together."

She was a small, dark woman a bit younger than Michael—perhaps around forty. Her eyes had the deep intensity associated with Gypsy beauty, and he imagined she'd broken more than one Rom heart in her youth.

"I must speak to you about my husband and Jarie."

He held open the car door. "Get in here."

She slid in next to him but he made no attempt to start the engine. "I heard you asking Sigmund about the iron angel. He knows more than he pretends. The men talk about it. I have heard it mentioned in their conversations."

"Is it some sort of cult? A bizarre religion, or even a sexual thing?"

"I don't know. Jarie went there often. He spoke of the cellars, and the heroin-snorting, and the iron angel. My husband was intrigued, but I don't know if he'd ever been himself."

"There was a number on a piece of paper in Jarie's pocket—470. Mean anything to you?"

"No. An address, perhaps, but I don't know where."

"How did you happen to find me here?"

She hesitated only an instant. "I was shopping on this street and saw you returning to your car."

Michael nodded. "You'd better go now. I have to see Captain Segar."

She smiled slightly and slipped out of the car. He watched her walking back along Furtuna Street and wondered if she might have been there spying on her husband. Or on Jennifer Beatty.

Back in Segar's office, Michael was openly discouraged. "I'm no detective. I've gone about as far as I can, but I've learned nothing about this so-called iron angel except that a great many people seem to know about it."

"If a great many people know about it, but not the police, that implies something beyond the law."

"Perhaps, but in which direction? Maybe drugs are involved, maybe it's merely a heroin-induced fantasy. Then again, it could be a sort of religious cult. Jarie Miawa might have been stabbed to death as some sort of sacrifice."

Segar snorted at that. "What sort of angel would demand a blood sacrifice?"

"The Angel of Death."

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"Michael, you are seeing darkness where there is only human fallibility. I am convinced that drugs are the key to this."

He told Segar about his meeting with Conrad Rynox. "I hate to see Jennifer back there with him."

"Do you think they might be still using that cellar for their activities?"

"I doubt it, so soon after Jarie Miawa's murder." But Michael wondered about it. "I suppose I should look at the place where his body was found."

"Go there tonight," Segar said. "I can equip you with a body microphone and I'll be waiting outside with some men. This is the number where we found the body—117 Furtuna."

"I know. It's right across the street from the apartment Jennifer shares with Conrad."

"You'll do it?"

"All right."

They waited until darkness descended on the city, soon after dinnertime, and Segar carefully taped a microphone and small transmitting unit to Michael's chest. "With that Gypsy tunic you wear, no one will notice it," he assured him.

"I hope I'm doing the right thing," Michael said, aware that Jennifer might be back in that cellar, if anyone was.

Segar had two men with him, and they dropped Michael at the corner of Grivitei and Furtuna. "We'll be listening," he promised.

Michael saw that old Kurzbic's shop was dark, and he pictured Sigmund back in the caravan with his wife and child. He walked around the corner, seeing only a few pedestrians hurrying home, and made his way to the building numbered 117. The sign outside identified several offices located there, but once past the front door he made his way back to the cellar stairs. The door was unlocked and no sound reached him from the darkness below. He turned on the light and started down.

The basement area was empty except for a few upended crates which could have served as seats for the heroin sniffers. He moved around it, wondering if he should report in to Segar. There was a door, perhaps leading to one of the adjoining cellars. It was unlocked and he swung it open.

Almost at once he saw the figure, about ten feet in, lit only by the faint glow from his side of the basement. It wasn't an iron angel, or an angel of any sort.

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It was Conrad Rynox and he was dead.

Back at headquarters, Segar slumped in his chair, staring at Michael Vlado. "You found me another body when I wanted you to find a murderer."

"I found what was there."

"He was stabbed just like Miawa, though this time the wound was right to the heart. He didn't live long enough to run away."

"The killer is getting better with practice," Michael observed. "When I touched him the body was cold. Any idea how long he'd been dead?"

"Several hours. They'll do an autopsy right away."

"What about Jennifer?"

"I'm sorry, Michael. I'm having her picked up for questioning."

"Tell your men to search the rest of those basements."

"I'm having that done too."

Michael was waiting when Jennifer Beatty arrived. "He's dead, isn't he? They told me he'd been stabbed and I know he's dead!"

"I'm sorry, Jennifer. He was never any good for you."

She flared into anger at his words. "How would you know?"

"He gave you heroin—"

"He gave me lots more besides that! Where is he? I want to see him."

"Perhaps later," Segar murmured. "First I must ask you some questions. If you do not wish Michael to stay—"

"He can stay."

"Would you like a lawyer?"

"I have no money for one. My God, do you think I killed the only man I ever really loved?" Her eyes flooded with tears.

Segar sighed, perhaps realizing that communication would be difficult in her present condition. Still, he pressed on. "When was the last time you saw Conrad Rynox?"

"This afternoon," she answered listlessly. "Michael drove me back to the apartment and we found Conrad asleep on the sofa. After Michael left a little before two I fixed Conrad a light lunch. Then he said he had to go out for a while. That was the last time I saw him."

"Did he say where he was going?"

She shook her head. "He often went out without telling me where, especially if he needed drugs from his supplier."

"Who's that?"

"I don't know."

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"I hope your memory improves, Miss Beatty."

"It was someone across town. His address is in the apartment. I insisted Conrad give it to me in case I got desperate some day when he wasn't home. Now are you going to let me see him?"

"First I want you to go over the contents of his pockets." Segar dumped a plastic evidence bag on the desk in front of him. There was German and Romanian currency, gripped by a golden clip, a leather wallet with some papers, a few coins, a handkerchief, some unidentified capsules, and a six-inch spring knife with the initials J. M. on it.

"That's Jarie Miawa's missing knife," Michael observed.

"Looks like it."

"He—he took it off Jarie's body," Jennifer said. "He went through his pockets before the police arrived, looking for drugs."

"These are deadly things." Segar demonstrated by pressing a button on the side of the knife. The spring-powered blade shot out one end.

Michael was more interested in the wallet. He looked through its contents, found an apartment key, some routine identification cards, and a folded slip of paper with a number on it.

"117," Michael read.

"The building where we had our drug parties," Jennifer said.

"Where Jarie Miawa died," Segar added.

Michael frowned at it. "The building was right across the street from his own apartment. Why would he need to write down its number?"

"Maybe to give to someone," Segar speculated. He took out a second evidence bag. "Here are his watch and rings. A battery-powered wristwatch with the correct time. No clue there to when he died."

"I saw that in his room." Michael picked up two fancy rings. "What about these, Jennifer? Was he wearing them both when he left you?"

"Yes. I gave him the sapphire." She seemed close to tears again.

Segar was starting to gather up the objects when the phone on his desk rang. He picked it up and listened intently. "Fine," he said. "All right." He hung up and turned to Michael. "The autopsy shows he died within a short time of eating, probably around two o'clock."

"It was after two when he left the apartment!" Jennifer insisted.

"He must have crossed the street to number 117 and been stabbed to death in the basement almost at once," Michael said. He was remembering meeting Zorica, Sigmund's wife, on that street.

The phone rang again and this time it was one of Segar's men,

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reporting that a search of the connecting basements in the block had yielded nothing unusual.

"Can I see him now?" Jennifer asked again.

Michael tried putting an arm around her shoulders. "What good will it do? It'll only make you feel the loss all the more."

She shook off his comforting arm. "I want to see him! It's my right!"

Michael and Segar exchanged glances over her head. "All right," the captain said. "Come this way."

"Life might be better for you now," Michael tried to tell her as they went downstairs. "You can get into a treatment program and stop your dependence on drugs."

"It's not just the drugs, it's not even Conrad, really. It's just that this is another ending. My life has been too full of endings. When I fled into the mountains to your Gypsy village it was an ending, and when I left Zurich it was another ending. By now I've run out of endings."

"Here we are," Segar said, holding open a white door with a No Admission sign. The attendant pulled out one of the drawers and lifted the sheet.

Jennifer froze, staring at Conrad's chalk-white face, thinking thoughts that Michael couldn't imagine. Yes, it was another ending for her. There was no denying that.

A low moan started then deep in her throat, building toward a fearful culmination. Michael, standing across the open drawer from her, tried to move, then shouted, "Segar! The knife!"

It was tight against her chest, just beneath the breastbone, and she had only to press the button for the spring release. They both saw the spurt of blood as the blade went in, and even as Segar grabbed her Michael knew it was too late.

In all the years that he'd known Captain Segar, he'd never seen anything hit him as hard as Jennifer Beatty's death. He sat in his office chair, his face almost as ashen as Conrad's had been. "How could I have done it, Michael? When I was distracted by those phone calls she must have slipped the knife up her sleeve or into her blouse. I never even noticed!"

"Neither of us noticed. She didn't want us to. She decided she wanted to die like that. Perhaps she was thinking of Juliet stabbing herself and falling on Romeo's body."

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"My God, Michael! Do they read Shakespeare in your village?" At least he was stirring a bit, and some color was creeping back into his face.

"I read it, and I'm sure Jennifer Beatty did too. She was an American kid, over here attending college, and she just took the wrong turn in the road. If there's fault to be found, it started a long time before you or I ever knew her."

Segar shook his head, as much to clear it as to deny the truth of Michael's words. "There is nothing to keep you here any longer," he said.

"Yes, there is."

"What's that?"

"The iron angel."

"A heroin dream, nothing more. Our men searched the basements and found nothing."

"Wouldn't an angel more likely be up than down?" Michael was examining the contents of the victims' pockets, especially the numbered slips of paper. "This 470 and 117. They could have been written by the same person. The sevens are almost identical. And both slips seem to have been torn from a notebook of some sort."

"We know what 117 is—the address of the office building where they gathered for the heroin parties. But what about 470?"

Michael pondered that, studying the slips of paper. "I can't believe Conrad would have written down the street number to give someone. And why should he have needed it for himself?" Then suddenly he knew. He knew it all. "Up, Captain, up! The angel is up, not down."

"Up?"

"On an upper floor of one of those buildings, where your men didn't search. Come on—I'll wear the body microphone again."

"You're going back there? It's almost midnight."

"I have to bring the killer to justice. I owe Jennifer that much."

As soon as he saw men entering the building at 117 at this late hour, he knew it was the place he sought. This time he went upstairs instead of down to the cellar, following people to the top floor of the old building. No one stopped or questioned him. He passed through a door with the others and found himself in a large darkened loft area lit only by a half-dozen small, smoky fires. Beyond them, the focus of everyone in the room, stood an ancient statue of iron, as tall as a man, its colors chipped and faded with the passage of time. The men approached one by one, and as they turned away they seemed to drop an offering into one of the burning pots.

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Michael joined the line, speaking softly into the body mike. As he drew nearer he saw that each person paused only an instant before the statue, gazing into its three evenly spaced eyes.

Then it was his turn. He saw the faded face of the iron angel and looked into its three eyes and gazed upon the truth he had expected.

To his left, through the smoke, old Kurzbic appeared holding a Luger pistol. As he raised it to fire, it seemed to Michael's eyes that everything moved in slow motion. It seemed that Segar would never make it across the room before the Luger fired.

But then he was onto Kurzbic, toppling him to the floor as the weapon fired harmlessly toward the ceiling. Lights went on and people scattered in every direction as more police filled the room.

From the floor Segar asked, "What did you see in the angel's eyes, Michael?"

"Today's number is 525. The iron angel is a gambling device."

Later, though he was bone-tired, Michael Vlado dictated a statement to complete Captain Segar's investigation. They were back in Segar's office.

"Somewhere, while adding to his collection of eighteenth-century clockwork automatons, Kurzbic came upon this large figure of an iron angel, fitted with three eyes and spring mechanisms to bring random three-digit numbers into view at the push of a lever. One digit appeared in each eye opening, and because they were small a viewer had to step right up to the statue to read them. Kurzbic decided to set up a daily lottery, a sort of numbers game, selling chances on whichever number the buyers wanted to play. He recorded the number in his book and gave the player a slip with the number written on it, as a receipt. Those were the slips we found on Jarie and Conrad. In the latter case, Conrad simply played the address of his drug den because he felt it was a lucky number."

"It wasn't lucky for him," Segar said. "What were those fires for?"

"Simply to burn up the losing tickets after betters had checked the day's number. Kurzbic must have feared a police raid would have turned up numbered slips in everyone's pockets. He had the master list, of course, to check for payoffs, but he kept that well hidden. I believe Jarie Miawa must have confronted Kurzbic on the night he was killed. Perhaps he discovered that with his clockwork skills Kurzbic was fixing the mechanism to stop only at numbers on which there'd be few winners, avoiding those that were getting a heavy play. In any event, Miawa was stabbed. He managed to stag-

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ger downstairs to the heroin den and died there. Kurzbic could have quickly wiped up any spots of blood on the steps."

"What about Conrad Rynox?"

"It was his death that identified Kurzbic as the killer. Shortly before the murder I saw him toss his wristwatch aside because it had stopped. Yet when we found his body the battery-operated watch was running perfectly. Conrad left the apartment with a watch that wasn't running and had it fixed within a few minutes. The only possible conclusion was that he visited a watch shop and purchased a new battery. Kurzbic's shop is across Furtuna Street and just around the corner on Grivitei, and Sigmund told me he was an occasional customer there. There'd have been no time for him to go anywhere else, according to the autopsy report. During those important minutes I'd taken Sigmund down the street for coffee, and old Kurzbic was alone in the shop."

"That's the trouble. He was alone! If he killed Conrad, how did he get his body around the corner to 117 and into the basement?"

"You're forgetting that the basements in that block all connect. Conrad must have indicated he knew the truth about Jarie's death. After Kurzbic replaced the battery he stabbed Conrad and pushed his body into the basement, waiting until later to move it over to where I found it."

"Hundreds of people must have known Kurzbic ran this gambling game."

"Of course! They bought numbers from him every day, and if they couldn't wait to hear the winner they went at midnight to watch the angel's wheels spin. I should have guessed a gambling involvement from the beginning. The first thing Jennifer told me about Jarie Miawa was that he liked to gamble. When I finally made the connection in my mind between those three-digit numbers and the three eyes of this fabled iron angel, I suspected an antique gambling device of some sort. That pointed me toward Kurzbic and his collection of clockwork automatons. When he saw me tonight he knew it was over and drew his gun, probably the one he mentioned keeping behind his counter."

Captain Segar sighed and signaled that Michael's statement was at an end. He looked tired himself. "I must thank you again, old friend. I could never have concluded this case without you."

Michael Vlado shook his hand. Without them, Jennifer Beatty might still be alive, but neither spoke those words. Perhaps it wouldn't have made any difference. Perhaps her number had simply come up, on the face of another iron angel somewhere. ●

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Historical detective novels have become so popular and plentiful that eventually there may be no historical event of significance without a fictional mystery grafted onto it. A pair of significant landmarks in American history, one taking place in the eventful year 1848 and the other almost a century later, are the subjects of two recent novels, one by a newcomer and the other by a more familiar old pro.

*** Miriam Grace Monfredo: *Seneca Falls Inheritance,* St. Martin's, $19.95. Librarian Glynis Tryon, about whom future novels are promised, assists pioneer feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton in organizing a Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. She also becomes involved in a series of murders revolving around the estate of a wealthy farmer recently deceased, giving the title a double meaning: the Friedrich Steicher inheritance and the conference's inheritance to future generations of women. Monfredo combines convincing period detail and atmosphere, real events and people, an efficient, unobtrusive writing style, and a well-conceived and satisfying puzzle plot. This is a notable debut.

** Donald Honig: *The Plot to Kill Jackie Robinson,* Dutton, $18. Before becoming one of the best-known baseball historians, Honig was a novelist and a prolific contributor of short stories to *AHMM* and other mystery periodicals. Here he combines his specialties in a novel that succeeds as a vivid fictionalization of an event with significance beyond the playing field: the breaking of baseball's color line by the stoic Robinson and Brooklyn Dodger general manager Branch Rickey. Unfortunately, the weak inverted detective plot falls short of the quality of the prose and historical detail. Ultimately, Honig cannot overcome the main drawback of this kind of historical assassination situation: that knowing the inevitable outcome dilutes the suspense.

*** Michael Crichton: *Rising Sun,* Knopf, $22. This controversial bestseller is set in an indeterminate near future in which the Japanese own most of Los Angeles, the U.S. is fully metric, and Hammer and Madonna are still icons. The discovery of a murdered woman mars the grand opening of the Nakamoto Tower, and police investigators John Connor (Holmes) and Peter Smith (Watson) must tread carefully in the politically charged case. This is a novel with a message: that U.S. business policies must be changed to be competitive with Japan, which plays by different rules. Only occasionally does the lecturing about international trade slow down the story, usually

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in the second half when the reader has already been hooked by Crichton's sure and practiced storytelling skills.

*** Bill Crider: *The Texas Capitol Murders,* St. Martin's, $21.95. The dauntingly prolific Crider introduces a new sleuth in Texas Ranger Ray Hartnett, called on to investigate violent death in the Austin Capitol building. The usual humor is present in abundance; a large cast of varied characters is efficiently managed; the background is exploited to full advantage; and the murderer is an especially interesting and memorable one.

** Mary Bowen Hall: *Emma Chizzit and the Napa Nemesis,* Walker, $19.95. Sacramento's Emma Chizzit—the name is a clever pun that I confess I didn't get until one of the characters spelled it out for me—operates a salvage business. In her third adventure, she and her enthusiastic team of senior citizen sleuths go after a tantalizing mcguffin: a long-lost Robert Louis Stevenson manuscript. Also involved are a pair of elderly twin brothers who exchange elaborate practical jokes. The people are likable, the low-key telling enjoyable, but the strained plot falls short.

** Patricia Wentworth: *The Girl in the Cellar.* HarperPerennial, $8.00. Apparently, this is the first American edition of the final Miss Silver novel, published in Great Britain in 1961, the year of its prolific author's death at age 82. It follows the adventures of an amnesia-plagued young woman whose earliest memory is finding the body of another woman in a cellar. The smooth style, quirky characterization, and some nice scenes and touches show an old pro at work. On the minus side, there is too much repetition (more than once an event is described to the reader, then recounted again by one character to another, adding nothing) and an extremely unlikely plot, almost parodic in its complications.

Note for collectors: If you've given up hope of acquiring all of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe novels in first edition, Bantam has done you the favor of providing a collectible paperback reprint of some of them, including the earliest and scarcest. Priced at $4.99 each, the following novels each have a page or two of Wolfean miscellany (recipes, reproduced cover art, contemporary reviews, comic strips, movie posters) plus an introduction by a well-known contemporary Stout fan (year of original publication and introducer in parentheses): *Fer-De-Lance* (1934; Loren D. Estleman), *The League of Frightened Men* (1935; Robert Goldsborough), *The Rubber Band* (1936; Nelson DeMille), *The Red Box* (1937; Carolyn G. Hart), *Where There's a Will* (1940; Dean R. Koontz), and *The Final Deduction* (1961; Andrew M. Greeley). Goldsborough's pastiches aren't bad, but there's nothing like the real thing. Bantam also offers the single solo effort of Stout's female private eye Dol Bonner, *The Hand in the Glove* (1937; Marcia Muller).

Another reprint with some col-

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lectible value is the paperback edition of Mary Higgins Clark's tricky and suspenseful 1991 novel *Loves Music, Loves to Dance* (Pocket Books, $5.99), which includes a fourteen-page interview with the author.

Also prominent among the recent reprints are the beginnings of two distinguished but quite different detective series. Michael Innes's first novel about Inspector John Appleby, *Death at the President's Lodging* (Penguin, $6), was published in Britain in 1936, appearing in the U.S.A. the following year under the title *Seven Suspects*. I believe the current edition, with the nostalgic green border of the publisher's Classic Crime line, is the first distributed in America to employ the original British title, reportedly changed because readers might believe it referred to F.D.R. rather than the president of an Oxbridge college. John Lutz's impressive 1976 hardcover debut, *Buyer Beware* (Carroll & Graf, $3.95), introduces sad-sack antacid-popping private eye Alo Nudger, whose child-stealing job on behalf of a divorced father turns into something much different and much more dangerous.

Considering his importance in the history of hardboiled detective fiction, Carroll John Daly has been little reprinted. There are reasons for this, as shown in two early Race Williams novels recently revived in trade paperback: *The Snarl of the Beast* (1927) and *The Hidden Hand* (1928) (HarperPerennial, $8 each). Though the novels are crude in plotting and narrative, devotees of tough dialogue, sardonic humor, and unrelenting action can enjoy them if willing to make allowances. The latter novel is the literary equivalent of an early movie serial, complete with mysterious criminal mastermind. (And if you can't spot the Hidden Hand, those old serials hold a lot of surprises for you.)

Readers interested in one of crime fiction's more esoteric subgenres, the juvenile delinquency novel, will want to acquire issue #28 of *Paperback Parade*, Gary Lovisi's informative and substantial fanzine devoted to paperback collecting. Included are checklists of JD novels along with articles on Hal Ellson and Harlan Ellison (two different people despite the similarity of names and, at least in the 1950s, subject matter). The bimonthly magazine is available ($6 per issue, a year's worth for $30) from Gryphon Publications, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209.

And finally a tip for the prospective mystery writer: in *Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America* (Writer's Digest, $18.95), editor Sue Grafton and an all-star cast of contributors have all kinds of helpful advice to offer.

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A HALLOWEEN TREAT

Although the mystery as we know it today has strong historical roots in tales of the fantastic and the supernatural, such stories have not generally come within the province of *EQMM*. For this, our Halloween issue, we make an exception, and remind mystery purists that even such masters of ratiocination as John Dickson Carr and Anthony Boucher were known to spin yarns in which preternatural forces played a role.

At no time of year are visitations from the spirit world alleged to be rifer than on October 31, the last day of the year in the ancient Celtic calendar, and the occasion of a Druid feast celebrating the end of summer—one of the precursors of our own Halloween festivities. It was a night, the ancients believed, when spirits of the dead visited the hearths of kinsmen in search of warmth; hilltop bonfires lit their way—and served the darker purpose of warding off witches and goblins, who were believed to devour children and helpless animals. In the United States, many of the customs of this pre-Christian feast with its roots in Scotland and Ireland survive, probably due to the large Irish immigration of the 1840s. Yet they are much secularized versions of the original, and later Christianized, folk practices, focussed more on pranks than on the sometimes macabre lore that spawned them. We owe thanks to writers such as the four we present here for keeping this special art of storytelling alive, and entertaining us with the spookiest figments of their imaginations.

Our celebration begins with Jo Bannister's off-beat tale of a haunted house, followed by Robert Campbell's more sinister piece about a professor who dabbles in the black arts. A found artefact unleashes a terrible power in Beverly T. Haaf's creepy story about a lonely woman, and goods stolen from a dead man bear out an old superstition in the contribution of Deane Jordan . . .

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HOWLER

by JO BANNISTER

It didn't look like a haunted house. It looked like a 1950s seaside bungalow, with bow windows and pebble-dash walls. Before the garden ran riot it would have been indistinguishable from all the other seaside bungalows in the area: prim, square, gazing out over the Channel with an air of cosy smugness.

But something happened at Mon Repose which, having no echo at Sans Souci up the lane or Dun Roamin on the corner, lifted it forever out of the seaside bungalow main sequence—for seaside bungalows, like stars, have their natural paths and life spans. The only difference is that stars grow to greatness while bungalows are at their brightest soon after construction and slip slowly down the scale of magnitude until they become weekend cottages for art teachers from Birmingham, the seaside bungalow equivalent of white dwarfdom.

What happened at Mon Repose was, in truth, a common enough little tragedy. A man discovered that his wife loved someone else. His reaction was swift and extreme. When it was learned that Arthur Smith had murdered his wife Amanda, dismembered her, buried her in a series of small holes along the garden perimeter and planted a fast-growing cypress hedge on top of her, a quiver of delicious shock ran through the bungalow community; coupled with relief that they had not after all asked him to be chairman of the Residents' Association.

He might have got away with it, except for the dog. Everyone in Channel Vista knew about Amanda. Arthur may have been the last person on the south coast to learn about her and Reginald Spink, and when he put it about that she had left him there was much pensive nodding, exchanging of significant glances, and offers of tea.

But the dog kept digging up the cypresses. There was divided opinion afterwards as to whether it was looking for Amanda, accusing her murderer, or just digging for bones. Whatever, its persistence seemed finally to drive Arthur mad. When he pursued it at a dead run down Channel Vista one Sunday morning, swinging a

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shovel and shouting, "I can dig another hole for you, you bastard!" suspicions were aroused.

The police talked to Arthur, dug in the garden and took away what they found there in plastic bags. They took Arthur as well. But there was no trial. Arthur Smith hanged himself from the bars of his remand cell, using the dog's lead which he had somehow secreted about his person.

That should have been the end of the matter. There was a brief flurry of publicity in the newspapers, then a member of the government was caught in a bed he should not have been in and Mon Repose dropped out of the news as if it had never been.

The bungalow was sold to a retired grocer and his wife. After one summer they put it on the market again, saying they missed the city. The music teacher who came next found it too remote for his pupils, and the cat fancier said her cats didn't like it. For a few years it was rented out on weekly lets for the season, then even that small demand dried up. For a decade the bungalow stood empty and the cypresses grew tall around it, hiding it from the road.

Miss Coghlan came upon Channel Vista while on a cycling holiday, discovered Mon Repose, fell in love with it and bought it all in the course of one week in April.

Miss Frank, who taught with her companion at Four Winds Junior School near Slough, thought Miss Coghlan had taken leave of her senses. "But my dear, look at the *state* of it! It'll be years before you can move in."

"Nonsense," Miss Coghlan said briskly. (No one had ever told her that adults don't usually address each other quite so dismissively. Of course children don't like it either, but they can't do much about it. Adults avoid people who are rude to them, which is why many teachers' only friends are other teachers.) "It's Easter now. I'll get men in right away to do any structural work, they should be through before we break up for the summer. Then I'll give up my flat and move in here. I'll put in my notice when we get back, work till July, then hang up my mortarboard. Then I'll have all the time in the world to decorate and do the garden."

Miss Frank was almost lost for words. "But—it's so sudden!"

"It's nothing of the sort. I've been thinking of retiring for a couple of years. If I don't jump soon I'll be pushed. A project to sink my teeth into is just the incentive I need."

"But Joan," wailed Miss Frank, almost in tears, "to give up your job, and your flat, and move away from the area you know, and your friends . . . it's so—"

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The word she was looking for was rash, or possibly foolhardy. But Joan Coghlan let a great beam spread across her strong face, sandwiched between the short iron-grey hair and the several chins, and nodded enthusiastically. "Isn't it?" she agreed. "Absolutely splendid."

In the event, there was little structural work to be done. Seaside bungalows were built well in the 1950s and Mon Repose remained basically sound despite the years of neglect. Which was just as well, because Miss Coghlan had unexpected difficulties getting men to work there.

The local contractor said he had work coming out of his ears and couldn't touch Mon Repose before September. She informed him that there's no such word as "can't." Mr. Stone explained that his workmen were already promised to other clients and Miss Coghlan suggested that where there's a will there's a way. He lost patience then, told her she could complain to his mother if she wanted but he still couldn't do anything for her until September. Cycling back to the guesthouse where she and Miss Frank were staying, she pondered—not for the first time—on how unhelpful grownups were.

Just before she had to return to Slough for the new term, Miss Coghlan found a contractor five miles down the coast who could start the repairs immediately. When the solicitor gave her the key to Mon Repose she passed it on to Mr. Wiggins. It did not at that time occur to her to wonder why Mr. Wiggins had so much less work on his books than Mr. Stone.

But later she concluded it was because Mr. Wiggins was an incompetent and his staff were work-shy layabouts. Every time she phoned to check on progress there was none. She accepted the first excuse he gave—that flu had been playing havoc with his schedule. She did not query the second, that the men had downed tools to search for a child lost on the Downs. But when he tried to tell her that he had three men off work attending the funerals of elderly female relatives, she told him tersely that he would attend her at "Mon Repose" at noon on Saturday to show her what had been done and explain the continuing delays.

Mr. Wiggins was waiting when she arrived, an uneasy figure in dungarees and a flat hat framed by the towering cypresses.

The tour of inspection did not take long. Very little work had been done in the weeks since Miss Coghlan gave him the keys. A path had been cleared through the jungle to the front door. A broken window had been removed and a plywood square tacked in its place.

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Two men could have done it in one not-very-energetic afternoon. The rotten window frame, the rewiring, and the plastering were untouched, and the lease on Miss Coghlan's flat ran out in three weeks' time.

"Mr. Wiggins, I don't know what to say." She had been a teacher for forty years, had never been lost for words before. "My bags are packed. We agreed I could move in at the end of the month."

Mr. Wiggins squirmed. "We've had—problems."

"You told me. Flu. Missing children. A surfeit of funerals."

He had the grace to blush. "Not that. The men—"

"Yes?"

"Don't like—"

"Don't like what?"

He finally got it out. "They don't like being here, Miss Coghlan. They say it's—weird. Spooky. Because of what happened here."

Miss Coghlan's eyebrows climbed like a couple of grey squirrels. "What did happen here?"

So he told her.

She didn't know whether to laugh or smack his wrist. "Mr. Wiggins! You mean to tell me that a gang of brawny builders are scared to work in a seaside bungalow, in broad daylight, because of something that happened twenty years ago?"

"They say there's—something here," he muttered.

"Something?"

"A presence."

"A presence!" she scoffed. "What, Amanda Smith hopping through the living room with her left leg tucked under her right armpit?"

Mr. Wiggins was embarrassed but dogged. "They say they've heard things. Heavy breathing. Groans."

"They've probably been listening to one another!"

"You ask in the village," he retorted, stung by her attitude. "They know. They know how many people have come here and couldn't get away quick enough. Ask them about the Howler. They know."

"Howler?"

He wished he hadn't said it. His eyes dropped from hers and settled on his reinforced toe-caps. "Well, none of my lads has heard it. You wouldn't catch them here after dark, which is when it howls. But them as have heard it say it sounds like a soul in torment. They say it's enough to turn your hair white."

He looked at her again, apologetic but determined. "Miss Coghlan, I'm sorry, but you'll have to find someone else to do your work. We

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can't finish. I know we're letting you down. I won't charge for what we've done already. But I'd be lying to you if I said my lads would set foot here again." He would not be argued with but left her standing alone outside her bungalow, astonished and alarmed. Not by the Howler but by the difficulties of renovating Mon Repose when builders' labourers were afraid to work there.

In despair she returned to Mr. Stone. She rather wished that she had not told him, when they parted, that the devil finds work for idle hands. But if he remembered he did not refer to it. He was a younger man than Mr. Wiggins; she hoped that might incline him to be less impressionable.

He received her courteously enough but held out no false hopes. "I can't improve on September. In fact, it'll likely be October now."

She had already considered her options. She could camp in the bungalow as it stood, waiting meekly for him to come and hoping that word of her dealings with Mr. Wiggins would not reach him. Or she could put her cards on the table.

Miss Coghlan had many faults but cowardice was not one of them. She told him that Mr. Wiggins had been to "Mon Repose," and why he had left. Her steely gaze challenged him to make the same excuse.

Instead a slow smile broke across his rather craggy face, weathered like the materials he worked with. "You're kidding!"

Miss Coghlan did not approve of slang. She said sternly, "No, Mr. Stone, I am not joking. That was the reason Mr. Wiggins gave for withdrawing his services. It's only fair to give you the opportunity to do the same. I should not wish to be responsible for an outbreak of the screaming hab-dabs among your employees."

Matthew Stone had left school at sixteen, mainly because of teachers like Miss Coghlan, and learnt the building trade at the elbows of successive bricklayers, carpenters, plasterers, and electricians. He was competent in every branch of house repair. At the age of twenty-seven he took a night-school course in bookkeeping, then he rented a yard and hung up a sign with his name on it. Five years on he employed bricklayers, carpenters, plasterers, and electricians, so his own input was mainly managerial. It was probably inevitable but it didn't altogether please him. He liked to feel mortar under his fingernails.

He regarded the teacher levelly. "Listen, Miss Coghlan. What I told you was the honest truth. I can't give you men without taking them away from people who've been waiting longer than you have and more patiently. But nobody's waiting for me. If it's any use, I'll

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come up to the Channel Vista with you and see if we can work something out."

Relief swept over her. "Good boy," she beamed, making him wince. He would never know how close he came to having his head patted as well.

He put Miss Coghlan's bicycle in the back of his pickup. When he parked in Channel Vista they sat a moment, looking at Mon Repose through the new gap in the vegetation. "It doesn't look like a haunted house," said Matt Stone.

"Did you know about the Smiths?"

"Oh yes—they were celebrities round here. Small communities like nothing better than a good grisly murder. And when the grocer left there was talk of unquiet spirits and stuff. I was at school then. A few of us sneaked up here to keep watch, but either we were too rowdy for even an unquiet spirit or there was nothing to see. I haven't heard mention of it for years. I didn't know anyone still took it seriously."

"Perhaps only Mr. Wiggins's workmen do. Perhaps it really was only an excuse to get out of doing the work."

"Let's go inside."

Mon Repose was a box divided down the middle by the hall. On the right were the living room, the bathroom, and the kitchen. On the left were the main bedroom, the second bedroom, and a box room. Above the front door there was a stained-glass fanlight. The fireplace in the living room was framed in imitation Dutch tiles. It wasn't a grand house. Some of Miss Coghlan's university-educated colleagues would have said it was a rather common, vulgar little house.

But she liked it, despite all the trouble. Perhaps because it was rather like her: full-bosomed, down-to-earth, practical rather than aesthetic, enduring. It didn't feel like a house that would allow an unquiet spirit to take advantage of it.

"Which of them is it supposed to be?" She found herself whispering and deliberately spoke up. "Amanda or Arthur?"

Stone shrugged. "Amanda, I suppose. She's the one who died here."

"But Arthur killed himself. It could be him."

Stone grinned at her. "Miss Coghlan, surely you don't believe there's a ghost at Mon Repose?"

She frowned. "Of course not, Mr. Stone, I was merely asking, since as a local man I presumed you would know which of the unfortunate

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Smiths was held responsible for the phenomenon known as the Howler."

The way she spoke threatened to reduce him to hysterics. He cleared his throat. "I'll take a look around. See what needs doing first." After he closed the door Miss Coghlan thought she heard laughter.

She stayed in the living room. It was a tip now, but in a few weeks or months she'd turn it into the kind of home she'd always wanted. The china cabinet would go there, the floral-chintz settee there, and she would look out from her bow window across a dozen Downland acres to the pewter glitter of the Channel. And she thought she would have a pet. The lease of her flat had made it impossible, and anyway she didn't approve of leaving animals alone all day. But now she could have a cat—better still a dog, that she could walk along the edge of the cliffs when the wind beat in from France.

At first when she heard the noise she assumed Matt Stone was playing silly devils. The little boys in her class were inveterate trick-players, and nothing she had seen of men persuaded her that they matured much as they grew older. She presumed he was breathing heavily at her through the crack of the door, and that his reason for doing so was that he thought it witty. She breathed rather heavily herself and said, "Mr. Stone, have you nothing better to do?"

"Than what?" He was in the front garden and turned at her voice, leaning his elbows on the window sill.

The front door was only a few steps away, the garden a few steps beyond that, but still . . . Nonplussed, Miss Coghlan shook her head. "Oh—nothing."

He came back inside, joined her in the living room. He poked at the window frame with a blunt spike. "That'll have to go. What do you want instead, wood or aluminum?"

While he was looking at her, and her lips were pursed to say "wood," they both felt it: a quiver in the air, a shock of cold travelling between them, as if Mon Repose had had a close encounter with an iceberg. That was all. Only from the surprise in Miss Coghlan's face did Stone know that he hadn't imagined it. "What the hell—?"

She didn't approve of swearing either. "How odd," she murmured pointedly.

Stone shrugged off the chill that had stroked him under his shirt. "Er—OK, so that's the first thing to do. Get a decent window in to keep out the draughts."

Miss Coghlan said faintly, "Mr. Stone—"

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He followed her eyes to the corner of the room. Ten years of dirt and flaking wallpaper had gathered there, and on top—as if set there by a Japanese flower-arranger—was a bone.

"Mr. Stone—you don't think—?"

He barked a hoarse laugh. "No way. The police took her away, didn't they, in plastic bags. This house has been empty for years. I expect a fox found its way in."

The idea appealed to her. Foxes made some very odd sounds, mostly after dark. Perhaps the Howler was only a vixen which had set up home in Mon Repose. "Yes—yes, of course," she murmured, feeling foolish. "A fox."

But he could see it was disturbing her, so Stone bent to move the bone. "Christ!" He straightened up abruptly, snatching his hand back, alarm in his eyes and a cold sweat breaking on his skin. Forming on top of his hand was a pattern of four red dots that grew quickly to black bruises. Stone and Miss Coghlan stared at it together.

Then the sensations began in earnest. A cold touch behind the knee of Miss Coghlan's stocking. A dampness trailed across the back of Stone's hand. The air in the room moved lightly as if something was passing unseen between them.

And a feeling of deep, unsupportable sorrow clutched each of them by the heart. Sorrow, and grief, and incomprehension. And guilt. The guilt welled like a fountain through all the other sensations, vast and bottomless, mind-sapping, soul-crushing, intolerable. A little moan that was more pity than fear crept from Stone's lips.

And then it was gone. Miss Coghlan staggered as if a great weight she was holding was suddenly removed. White-faced, their eyes stretched with shock, they stared round the room. But nothing had changed. They were alone, in every sense of the word. The bone atop its mound of rubbish had not moved.

By wordless agreement they moved outside. Dry twigs snapped under their feet as they passed through the hall.

The breeze on the cliffs restored a little of Miss Coghlan's colour. "Well, Mr. Stone," she managed at length, "you wanted to see my haunted house. Is there anything you want to go back and see again?"

He gave a gruff chuckle. She might be rude, overbearing, and self-important, but her nerve was steadier than his. "What are you going to do?"

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"Do?" she echoed. "I thought we'd agreed. First the window frame, then—"

"You still mean to live here?" His voice cracked.

"I have nowhere else to go. All my savings are in this house. I thought it was a bargain: now I doubt if I could sell it at any price. Either I move in here in three weeks or I try the YWCA."

If it had been Stone's choice he'd have thought about it longer. But it wasn't. The only choice he had was staying or leaving. "We could try the vicar."

"We?"

He shrugged. "We have an arrangement about making your house habitable. It sure as hell isn't habitable like this."

She appreciated his support if not his language. Her eyes thanked him. "I didn't feel it was—inimical. Did you?"

He combed his memory for what inimical meant, then shook his head. It had felt neither hostile nor evil, just very very unhappy—a soul that quite literally didn't know where to put itself. Even though it had hurt and frightened him, he had not felt it meant to threaten them. "All the same, you can't live with that much—misery. We have to try and—"

"Lay it?" she suggested, a faint returning humour lifting one corner of her wide mouth. "Exorcise it?"

"Set it at peace," he countered, refusing to be baited.

She smiled. "You're right. Let's see the vicar."

As soon as they explained the problem, the vicar warned them that he wouldn't be able to help. Attempts had been made to exorcise Mon Repose ten years before, as a last resort before it was abandoned. An expert had been summoned, a cleric who evicted unquiet spirits with the practised ease of a bouncer removing rowdy guests from a nightclub. But the presence at Mon Repose defeated his best efforts, slinking back as soon as he had gone on three separate occasions.

"Was he able to explain his failure?" asked Miss Coghlan.

The vicar's brow creased with remembering. "Not really. The thing didn't fight him, it just got out of the way while he was there and came back when he left. Like you, he thought it wasn't an evil thing. No nasty smells at the mention of the Lord's name or anything like that. It just—" He shrugged. "It didn't seem interested in what he had to say."

As they went to leave, Miss Coghlan paused in the doorway. "Which of them is it? Arthur or Amanda?"

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The vicar shook his head sadly. "We failed to establish even that. My colleague called it in the names both of the victim and the perpetrator but it wouldn't answer." He recalled another detail. "It tried to bar his way with sticks. Wherever he went in the house he found sticks lying in his way. He threw them away but somehow they always found their way back."

Glancing at her, Matt Stone thought he saw a glimmer of understanding in Miss Coghlan's eye.

Outside he challenged her. "You've got a line on this, haven't you?"

"Well—perhaps," she allowed. "I'm not sure. There's something I can try. If I'm right, we can solve this problem."

"Where now?"

"I've some shopping to do. Then back to the bungalow."

"It'll be going dark in an hour."

"I know. That's when we can talk to him."

"Who?" Stone was afraid he already knew.

Miss Coghlan nodded. "The Howler."

The last of the day was dying out of the sky when Stone parked his pickup in front of Mon Repose. Oyster-coloured streaks on the high clouds pointed westward. But no light fell on the still house, for the moon was not yet risen. A few stars, frosty with distance, watched through breaks in the clouds. When Stone turned off the engine they could hear the wind. They could not be sure if that was all they could hear.

Miss Coghlan led the way, a broad-beamed Amazon in lisle stockings. Stone followed with her shopping bag.

He flashed a torch round the dark rooms. The scene was as they had left it: the dirt, the dry twigs, the bone. The only footprints in the dust were theirs.

From the bag Miss Coghlan drew out two cushions, one of which she passed to Stone. "We may as well be comfortable."

She sat down like a collapsing marquee. "Oh, Mr. Stone—if it's all right with you, I think we should have the light out."

What could he say?—"Certainly not, I'm a bundle of nerves already, if you put the light out I may well cry?" If he had any function here at all it was to protect her: he couldn't say he was afraid of the dark. Nor was he, normally; but this wasn't a normal sort of darkness. He turned off the torch.

Softly, in the blackness, Miss Coghlan said, "We may have quite a wait."

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"I'm in no hurry," muttered Stone.

Half an hour passed, then an hour. Still there was no moon, no light of any kind. Miss Coghlan got cramp. Shifting her position on the cushion on the bare boards, she made enough noise to frighten away any number of Howlers. Stone wondered how long she would wait if it declined to make an appearance.

Then, between one moment and the next, it was with them. There was nothing to see. They didn't even hear it at first. But the temperature dropped abruptly as it had that afternoon, the air moved fractionally against their cheeks as if something had passed close by them, and Stone felt something like breath and something like a kiss on his sore hand. "Miss Coghlan . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Stone," she said quietly. "I know." He marvelled at the massive calm in her voice. He was rigid with tension, the hairs standing up on his neck and his arms, his skin suddenly cool with sweat. "It's all right." Something in her tone made him think she wasn't talking only to him.

Then in the darkness the sounds began. Heavy breathing that rose quickly to a rapid pant. A clicking on the floorboards. A soft plaintive whine like a child crying. And through it all came pouring the grief and the terrible guilt, the timeless damnation of blame, the overarching wretchedness. Miss Coghlan had not known that such profound, excoriating misery could exist even for a moment. The idea of it persisting eternally in a single lost soul appalled her. She whispered, "Please—it's all right—"

But the soft whine grew first to a plangent keening, so close beside them that it set their skin crawling and their teeth on edge, and then to the howling which had given the thing its name. The disembodied voice in the darkness soared in a crescendo of almost tangible despair, inconsolable arpeggios of remorse and regret playing over the dominant theme of grief. The sound filled the room, filled the house, battered down on the crouched listeners in a Niagara of torment.

Gradually then the sounds of despair began to abate, the terrible wailing to break as if for breath. Miss Coghlan began to punctuate the gaps with her own voice, her firm-but-kind schoolmarm's voice, reassuring, confident, promising order.

"It's all right," she said again, somehow keeping her tone low, even, and rhythmical. "It wasn't your fault. You're not to blame for what happened. None of it was your fault.

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"Mummy and Daddy fell out. Mummy was a bad girl and Daddy got cross. Sometimes cross people do things they don't mean to. I know you loved them both, and they both loved you. Even when Daddy was cross with you, it was more because of what he'd done than what you'd done. He was very unhappy.

"He blamed you for giving him away, didn't he? But you didn't mean to. It was your nature to dig in the garden. If he'd thought, he'd have known that. Anyway, he couldn't have lived with what he'd done even if no one ever found out. He chose to die for what he did to Mummy. He'd have done the same thing at home if he hadn't been taken to prison. You couldn't have stopped him. If he hadn't used the lead he'd have used something else."

Stone, listening to the rhythmical sing-song of the teacher's voice, his flesh alive with the soft keen that the unearthly howling had sunk to, finally understood. The Howler was—of course. That was why Miss Coghlan had bought what she had, which at the time had made him doubt her sanity.

As if she read his mind, her broad hands moved to the shopping bag. "I've brought some things for you." Unseen in the dark, she laid them out on the floor. "There's a nice bit of steak. There's a tennis ball, and an old slipper of mine—it's not the same as one of Mummy's, I know, but you're very welcome to it. And there's this." Chain jangled in the dark. "Daddy took yours, didn't he? Never mind, you'll like this one. I thought we could bury them in the garden, so you'll know where they are and you can come for them any time you're lonely.

"It's bedtime now. You haven't had much rest these last twenty years, have you? Never mind, it's all over. You're a good boy, you mustn't blame yourself for what happened anymore. Go to sleep; and if you're still feeling bad tomorrow come back and we'll talk some more. I'm going to be here from now on and you're always welcome. I'd like to have a dog about the place."

Stone dug a hole in the garden and Miss Coghlan carefully put the contents of the bag in the bottom. She said softly, "If I knew where your body was I could bring it here too. But I don't know where you died. I hope these will serve."

"It's—quieter, isn't it?" murmured Stone, feeling the difference like a fading electricity.

The moon had risen while he was digging. He saw Miss Coghlan smile. "Yes. I think he's at peace now."

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They walked back to the pickup. The Channel moved below them like a sleeper under silk.

"How did you know it was the dog?"

"I didn't know," she said, "but I began to suspect. It didn't answer to either Arthur or Amanda, and it wasn't interested in the exorcist's homilies. The Church can't have it both ways: if animals have no souls they can't be expected to acknowledge the Lord's name.

"That poor dog had the whole burden of what happened here dumped on him. The master he loved murdered the mistress he loved in the house he loved. When instinct drove him to dig her up, his master tried to kill him. Then he used the dog's lead to end his own life. The poor creature has spent the last twenty years not understanding why his world fell apart but firmly believing it was his fault. Of course he howled."

"If you'd been wrong—if you'd found yourself trying to appease something evil with half a pound of steak and an old slipper—!"

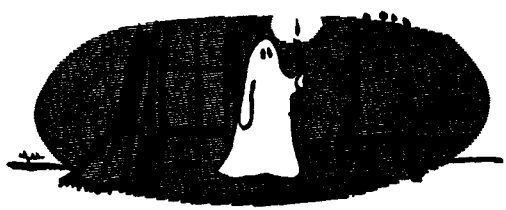
"Oh, I was pretty sure by then," said Miss Coghlan, growing smug now the drama was over and everything was going to be all right. "These things we felt and heard—the heavy breathing was a dog panting, the cold touch was his nose—and he bit you when you went to take his bone. Then he licked you to say sorry."

"And dogs howl when they're unhappy." Stone frowned. "What was that clicking sound?"

"Toenails on the floorboards. But it was the sticks that clinched it."

He stared at her. "Sticks?"

"You remember what the vicar said: that the exorcist couldn't move for the sticks the Howler put in front of him. Then he threw them away but they kept reappearing." She laughed, a deep ringing tone like a bell. "The poor dog wanted someone to play with him. The exorcist threw the sticks away and the dog brought them back."



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THIS CHURCH IS OPEN

by ROBERT CAMPBELL

Artemidorus had been a professor of comparative religion for more than thirty years and now held the chair in Humanities at a small college in New England. He was considered an authority on the origins of Satan. Not the Satan of popular horror films and novels, but the Satan of many and varied names who was central to the ancient religions, the basic magic and superstitions of which come to us nearly whole, from Paleolithic and Neolithic times. Several scholarly books were among his credits, one of which had some financial success when an imaginative publisher marketed the paperback version of it with a lurid cover showing some devil with horns and tail having his way with a swooning maiden.

He did not believe in devils except as the abstract embodiment of evil, just as he did not believe in saints except as the symbolic embodiment of good.

He was nominally a Christian but had left the raising of their children in the Episcopalian faith to his wife, his own church attendance being limited to obligatory weddings, christenings, and funerals, with the occasional midnight mass attended for the sake of tradition at Christmas.

For years he had given faith a sidelong glance and had he been questioned sharply about his trust in God, he would have said that he had none and scarcely any belief at all in more than the mere idea of God, some intention—before the forming of the universe—to be God.

His wife was dead these five years and the children grown, making lives elsewhere, one in California, one in Florida, and one in Texas.

He lived alone, but not lonely, in the house to which he'd taken his bride twenty-eight years before, when he was just a poverty-stricken associate and immortality was possible, surrounded by his books and a collection of vinyl records become collector's pieces, twice made obsolete, once by tape cassettes and again by CDs.

He often thought that he himself had been twice made obsolete, once by the *Time* cover that asked the question, "Is God Dead?"

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and again when the born-again Christian Fundamentalists seemed about to convert all of America.

It was at that time that he'd narrowed his field of study and gathered his reputation for knowing the origins and nature of Satan better than any but a very few of his fellow scholars.

What they did not know—what no one but his acolytes, witches and warlocks recruited from students given to curiosity and rebellion and certain women of the college town given to hysteria and repressed sexuality knew—was that he had made himself a magus, the leader of an original cult of his own design and manufacture.

It had started harmlessly enough with walks and gatherings in the woods beside the campus, the telling of stories and the breathing of certain herbs, the occasional naked mass and innocent orgy, but as all leaders discover sooner or later, he'd found it necessary to spike the emotional cocktail he offered his congregation with darker stuff, black masses, the ritual kissing of his buttocks, more shameful perversions—willingly committed but needing the legitimacy of ritual, the sacrifice of dogs and cats, and finally the sacrifice of one of their number who threatened to betray them.

Having escaped discovery once—the murder going unsolved and himself undiscovered—he tested his power to rule and take the lives of others again . . . and again . . . and again . . . choosing the time and place with great care, making certain that the murders took place far from the college where he taught, his sense of omnipotence growing, disdainful of every belief and faith except his belief and faith in his own masquerade, no longer needing or wanting any ceremony or excuse when the desire to kill took hold.

Through the years, he'd developed a devilish skill at identifying his half-willing victims at practically a single glance, knowing almost without fail that young man or woman, that thin-lipped housewife or balding clerk, whose midnight fantasies would urge them to strike up a conversation with him and go willingly into some dark copse of trees beside a river, or glade within a wood, which would become their grave.

He'd been asked to Oxford to give the Merlin Sylvester Lecture at Christ's College, the seminar named for that magus who prophesied to Edward the Confessor, the last Anglo-Saxon king of the English.

Rather than accept the offer of accommodations at the college, which he feared might afford him little privacy but, instead, an endless round of meals with well-meaning graduate students and

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dons anxious that he should not lack for any gesture of hospitality, he'd arranged for a per diem with which he might secure his own rooms at the hotel or bed and breakfast of his choice.

A man of frugal habits, he'd chosen a modest establishment two miles from the city center along the Bodley Road, at the bottom of a quiet lane, where a clean bed and private toilet, a pleasant lounge with a television, and what proved to be a better than merely decent breakfast cost him a third as much as a plain room in a city hotel would have done.

It had the added advantage of giving him a morning and evening constitutional during each of the five days of his stay, and hours of unobserved privacy which no one would ever question or intrude upon.

Each day, going into town, he noted a small wooden church, set well back from the road, its entry apparently secured with a lattice gate of wood painted green, a piece of paper fixed to it which, he idly surmised, must be the announcement of Sunday worship. There was nothing distinguished about it. In a country where great antiquity was commonplace and in a city where significant architecture was everywhere to be seen, he felt no compulsion to explore its interior or surrounds, but found every reason to simply hurry by on his way to the paths along the canal and river, the bustling streets of the commercial city, or the quiet greenswards and broad playing fields of the colleges assembled.

Yet each time, after the first time, that he walked past the little church, morning or evening, he found himself wondering what exactly was written on the sign.

One evening, during a lull in the television programming, he asked the owner of the bed and breakfast if he ever attended the church along the Bodley Road and did he know its denomination. His host, a Mr. Fluelis, seemed to find it difficult to identify the building to which he referred, in the end calling upon his wife to refresh his memory, which she was unable to do, laughingly admitting that she had no interest in churches along the Bodley Road, scarcely ever walking there herself since they'd acquired their first automobile ten years before.

It was of no consequence. Things seen every day of one's life often made no impression. It was like asking directions of someone in the neighborhood in which they lived; they could easily lead you to your destination on foot, but to describe the turns and street names was often beyond their ability.

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The lecture was a great success, his delivery wry and funny, his material crisp and full of meat, his theme just challenging enough to warrant some debate over a glass in a local pub right after.

So it was well after dark when he was ready to go back to his rented bed.

He might have taken a taxi; it was an inexpensive journey. Or he might have taken a bus; there were more than enough going along the Bodley Road even at that hour. But there was a full moon, the bite in the air was invigorating, and he was warmed by the three glasses of port he'd drunk. The prospect of a long walk home appealed to him.

He'd not gone a hundred yards along the Bodley Road when he became acutely aware that he was being followed by one of his companions in the pub, a young man, delicate and feminine of face and figure, who'd had little to say and equally little to drink, but had merely stared at him as he'd informally expanded upon his lecture with anecdotes about Satan and Satanism which would not have been appropriate in a lecture hall setting.

At the railroad station, he hesitated, turned aside and then faced the student, remarking upon the fact that they seemed to be walking in the same direction and asking if the student was taking the last train to some neighboring town.

The young man replied that he had been overstimulated by the lecture and the ensuing conversation in the public house, and was walking to restore a measure of calm before returning to his rooms at Christ's Church College.

Artemidorus suggested that he walk with him and gave the student his promise that they would not talk of stimulating matters, intellectual or otherwise. It was enough to set the hook, and of course they did talk of the old religions and of faith expressed through carnality, of Druidic ritual and witchcraft, and of *la vecchia religione,* that primitive religion that had survived through the ages in Catholic Europe.

When they passed the bridge that arched over the canal, Artemidorus suggested they walk along the path for a distance before returning, at which time they would part ways, he going on the mile to his room in the bed and breakfast and the student returning to Oxford and his bed in the school dormitory.

Fifty yards along the canal, with the moon lying like a silver coin on a sea of molten lead, at a place where a footbridge sheltered a thick stand of water reeds and climbing vines, Artemidorus first

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kissed, then undressed, and finally murdered the young student, never having even asked his name.

After concealing the clothes and body in the vegetation, he washed his hands and returned to the Bodley Road, coming up from the towpath in sight of the church.

Somehow, it no longer looked so commonplace and undistinguished. Even though it was clearly modern, no more than fifty or sixty years old, the thought came to him that the fabric of the building might well incorporate a stone altar-screen or a window, a tomb or even an entire wall, from some early church that had once stood upon the spot. With the intention of walking around the perimeter, inspecting the windows and foundation as best he could, he walked down the path of the latticework gate with the sign upon it.

Instead of the schedule of masses, it bore the words, "This Church Is Open. Please Secure the Gate and Door Behind You When You Enter or Leave."

A little thrill went through him. He felt as though an opportunity for a small adventure had been thrust upon him very unexpectedly. He'd thought he'd just have a stroll around the exterior of a commonplace little church building but, instead, here he was, given the opportunity to explore its modest secrets and mysteries on toward midnight in the full of the moon after having committed a terrible act.

The latch gave easily to his hand. It swung open without a sound. He closed it behind him as he'd been admonished to do and went into the archway, where the moonlight was prohibited by the overhanging eaves. The iron-hinged oak door gave to his hand as easily as had the gate. He stepped inside, closed it behind him, turned for the first full view of the interior and was nearly overcome with wonder at the extraordinary grandeur that presented itself to him.

This was no common wooden church fifty or sixty years old. The outer structure was no more than a skin, a concealment of and protection for the ancient temple of stone within.

He could not date it precisely, there were a dozen architectural epochs jumbled there, centuries lying cheek to jowl, a sixteenth-century wall burrowing into a wall from the tenth, a stained-glass Gothic window, filled with the light of the moon, illuminating a Norman memorial stone set into the floor. The pews were carved with a hand that had been alive during the historical Arthur's time. The christening font was so ancient that he believed it might well

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be pre-Christian. It was a treasure filled with pieces worthy of the greatest museums in the world.

It was all quite dumbfounding.

But nothing was so overwhelming as the painting on the wall behind the altar. The power and magnificence of it burst upon him like a revelation, the moonlight suddenly striking through a clerestory set high beneath the roof, bringing it to blazing life, as though the thousand writhing figures in the painted hell below and the ascending souls on their way to heaven above moved before his gaze.

He had seen most of the world's great altarpieces in his scholarly travels, even the one by Michaelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, which was said by many to be the greatest of them all. But none, he would swear, matched the one before him now.

He glanced at the lucky few on their way to heaven and union with Christ, but his eyes were inexorably drawn to the tortured men and women burning in the lake of fire. Never had he seen such graphic descriptions of human torment and despair. Never had he felt such horror.

All at once, it was as though he could hear the cries and laments of the damned, so vivid was the impression made upon him, and then he became aware that someone besides himself had come into the church and admitted the sounds of the sighing trees and what traffic there might be along the Bodley Road.

Artemidorus turned to face whoever it might be.

A very tall man wearing a black suit and dickey, a ribbon of white collar gleaming at his neck, pale face, pale, pale hands, black hair, and pointed beard, stood there smiling at him. "Good morning," he said.

"Is it morning?"

"Well, it's past one o'clock."

"I've been here more than an hour?"

"Time plays tricks in here, I've been told."

"Are you a Roman priest?"

The cleric—if that was what he was—didn't answer, but merely made a gesture with his hand that might have been a blessing or might have been merely dismissive, telling Artemidorus that what he might be was of no matter.

The great altarpiece drew Artemidorus back and he turned away from the man in black, astonished anew at the brilliant verisimilitude of the work. He felt that, were he to reach out his hand, his fingers would be singed by the flame.

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"A remarkable representation of the fate that awaits all sinners, is it not?" the cleric said.

"I've never seen the like."

"Do you believe in hell?"

Artemidorus turned around again, the altarpiece at his back, and smiled in his gentle, dismissive way. "I believe in the power of the superstition that presents such a notion to the human race."

"But not in the actuality of it?"

"Well, of course I don't believe in hellfire and brimstone," Artemidorus said.

There was a great rush of hot wind. Artemidorus turned around another time.

The painting seemed to burst apart and collapse upon itself in a blaze of flame and fire. The damned souls twisted and turned in their agony, reaching out their hands, trying to grasp Artemidorus by the sleeve. There was a path that opened that descended into darkness.

The pale vicar smiled. "Oh, you will," he said. "I assure you that you will."

Outside, the sign on the green lattice gate read, "This Church Is Closed. Mass on Sunday at 8:00, 9:00, and 10:00."

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THE SHOE

by BEVERLY T. HAAF

Denise and Paul were on the road again after stopping for lunch in a restaurant just south of Frederick, Maryland.

"Look at that shoe," she said, pointing out the front car window, glad for a distraction from her painful thoughts. A man's black shoe lay abandoned on the gravel shoulder. "I wonder what happened."

Paul lifted his brow. "Somebody lost it, Denise."

"I *know* that. I mean—" She hated it when he made her feel stupid, but she went on anyway. "It looks almost new." She peered out her window as they rode by. "Was there an accident, or did somebody pull over and open their car door and not notice they had pushed it out, or maybe . . ." Discouraged by Paul's lack of response, she allowed her words to trail off. The dark reflection of the shoe faded in her side mirror.

Denise and Paul were on a reconciliation trip. He had moved out of her apartment after picking a fight over nothing—she suspected the real cause had been another woman, only she hadn't wanted to know for sure. After a week and a half, he had come back, saying he was miserable without her and would she accompany him to a business conference in Knoxville, Tennessee? They would drive down from Baltimore and have a splendid weekend. It would mark a brand-new beginning. Feeling her prayers had been answered, Denise had accepted at once.

That morning, his car wouldn't start, so they ended up taking hers. All had been fine until lunch, when something he said suggested he had known ahead of time that his car wasn't working. Was needing her car the real reason behind his invitation? Denise tried to tell herself she had misunderstood, but the awful feeling of being used wouldn't go away. Had she let him make a fool of her again?

It was dusk by the time they reached Knoxville. "How's this?" Paul asked with a grin when they entered their hotel room, which had a king-sized bed. He drew her close and Denise decided he had been sincere about a reconciliation after all. "It's perfect," she said.

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He kissed her and went out to register for his conference. She unpacked and bathed, looking forward to the evening.

Instead of them dining alone, Paul invited two male conferees to join their table. "Denise only came along to go shopping," he explained, introducing her and dismissing her in one stroke. The three men talked shop throughout the meal. Trying not to feel hurt, Denise reminded herself that the purpose of the conference was business. *When we're alone in our room, I'll have him all to myself.*

Feeling out of place at the welcoming cocktail party, she told him she was calling it a night. He nodded distractedly, his attention on a female conferee who appeared to be alone. Then he turned and bathed Denise in a look so glowing that she forgot everything else. "See you later," he whispered.

His promise held her until the pay-TV movie and the late show were both over. Lying in the big, lonely bed, Denise cried in the darkness. Paul couldn't be trusted—she had known it almost from the start. They had met five years ago, after her invalid sister, her only family, had died. Back then, Paul had hung on her every word, but as soon as she had surrendered, he turned cold. Yet where would she be without him? She was thirty-two and she seldom met other men. Paul might be a rat, but he was *her* rat.

She awoke to feel him crawling into bed. Despite her earlier tears, her breath caught in anticipation when he moved close. Maybe things would be all right after all. He reached for her and she smelled the cloying sweetness of another woman's perfume.

Her stomach clenched and she feared she would throw up. Head spinning, she stumbled from bed, suddenly desperate to escape. Barely thinking, she found her clothes in the darkness and fumbled them on, tucking her short nightgown into her jeans as if it were a blouse, pulling her sweater on over it.

"What the devil are you doing?"

She blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "I'm going home."

"Like hell you are!" Sitting up, Paul turned on the bed lamp. His naked chest looked pale and vulnerable in the shaded light and his expression showed alarm.

Denise blinked, realizing he had taken her seriously. A sense of power filled her. "It's my car, isn't it?" She took out her suitcase, opened the closet, yanked the bureau drawers wide.

"But—what about me?"

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His anxious question fueled her newfound power. "Bum a ride with one of your conference friends. Or walk."

Packed, Denise snapped her suitcase shut. Paul had taken advantage of her for the last time. Burning self-realization swept her from the room, down the elevator, and out to the parked car. Paul had wanted her on the trip for her car; he had wanted her in his bed in case he struck out with somebody else. Paul had been bad news from the start, but out of fear and loneliness, she had bargained away her self-respect. She may have been a fool, but never again.

Denise drove through the night, taking a different route from the one coming down. Paul had wanted to avoid the Washington traffic so they had traveled west from Baltimore to Frederick before going south on I-81. Now, she aimed to cut east to Richmond, then follow I-95 straight to Washington, taking pleasure in a course he would disdain.

A cloudy day dawned. Denise stopped for gas and a snack. She sipped dark coffee and smugly envisioned Paul ducking out of meetings to see if she had returned to their room. He wouldn't be able to believe she had actually left him.

By afternoon, however, she was weary from driving and suffering second thoughts. Her apartment would be so lonely. Suppose Paul had had good reason for having come to bed so late? She had been half asleep—maybe she had imagined the perfume. He might have been able to explain. Shouldn't she have at least given him the chance? She gripped the steering wheel with sweaty hands. Leaving Paul had been a mistake. The week and a half without him had been hell.

That's when she saw the shoe, sitting exactly where she had seen it before. Her car was past it when she realized it couldn't be the same shoe. She was traveling north, not south, and miles to the east. This wasn't even the same road!

Two shoes placed so similarly at least seventy-five miles apart excited her imagination. She eased her foot from the accelerator and pulled off onto the shoulder. The shoe showed in her rear-view mirror, the toe pointing toward the highway.

"Come on, mister, I'm waiting." She spoke as if picking up a hitchhiker. A chill shivered through her. *This is silly. I should drive on.* But since she was already stopped, what harm would it do to take a closer look? Backing her car, she felt a bump. The shoe must have been closer than she had thought. She got out and found it lying in front of her rear tire.

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Being run over had caused it no apparent harm. She turned it in her hands. It was for a right foot. There were no scrapes, no scuffs, no signs of weathering—as if it were made of indestructible stuff. The smooth black leather, cool in the sunless afternoon, wasn't even dusty. It held an unusual luster, giving the impression of patent, yet seeming to absorb light rather than reflect it. There were no size markings or manufacturer's stamp. Everything about the shoe seemed odd, right down to the lace tips, polished black bone instead of plastic or metal. It dawned on her that it was handmade. Fascinated, she slipped her hand inside. Her arm jerked. The inside of the shoe was body-heat warm.

Denise felt a sudden impulse to drop the shoe and flee. Nervously, she glanced around, feeling on stage. *What's wrong with you, spooked by a lost shoe.* She breathed deeply, calming herself. The shoe was warm because hot exhaust had blown in when she had run over it. Simple enough once she figured it out.

With sudden inspiration, she loosened the laces and lifted the tongue. Printed on the inside was a wiggly red design, a stylized letter Y. The owner's initial? Her face twisted. The shoe was quality, but worthless. Just like people, shoes were only good in pairs.

Her thoughts went to the shoe she had seen the day before. Suppose they were a match? No, what a dumb idea. What sort of freak accident could separate them so widely? Someone would almost have to do it on purpose. *I lost a shoe on a trip traveling south, so I tossed out the other one on a different trip, traveling north.* Denise smiled at the farfetched scenario. They couldn't be a pair. Still, it seemed wrong to leave a perfectly good shoe behind. Back in her car again, she placed the shoe beside her on the passenger seat.

Could the first shoe be its mate? As she headed toward Washington, the notion persisted. Maybe she should go and find out, just to satisfy her curiosity. Reaching the Beltway, she tossed the idea back and forth. Was the detour worth another hour and a half when she was already so close to home? *Home to her lonely apartment.* The entire notion was ridiculous. *What did she have better to do?* She was exhausted. *Not anymore. The idea of hunting down the other shoe was exhilarating.*

The sign for Frederick appeared. That settled it. Wild-goose chase or not, she was going. The shoe slid to the floor and landed in the same position as if someone were wearing it. Amused, Denise imagined the attire of an imaginary companion. To go with his handmade shoe, he needed a custom-tailored suit. The kind a diplomat or the

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heir to a vast fortune would wear. He would be handsome, that went without saying. Suave and darkly handsome.

Shortly before Frederick, she refilled the gas tank. Once she found the shoe—*if* she found it—she would drive straight home without stopping. *At least she wouldn't go home alone.* She passed the restaurant where she and Paul had eaten lunch. Her pulse quickened. Almost there.

The shoe appeared. Denise laughed in a giddy way, feeling almost as if she had conjured up the image. From a distance, it looked a match to the one she had already. Only, of course, it wasn't. It couldn't be. Eyes bright, she pulled to the shoulder and coasted up to her prize.

Leaving her engine running, she got out and rounded the front of her car. The shoe sat several feet in front of the bumper. Her nerves hummed. It was a man's black dress shoe. For a left foot. Hands trembling, she picked it up. It was a perfect match to the one in her car. Identical, right down to the black bone lace tips and the stylized initial on the underside of the tongue.

The implausibility stunned her. What had happened was totally outside the normal nature of things. She struggled for breath. If she put her hand inside the shoe, would she find it warm, as if its wearer had just shucked it off?

Something screamed inside her head: *Drop it. Throw it away.* She was about to do so when the sound of her engine rose above the rush of passing traffic. Denise stared at her car. Someone was at the wheel. No, she was mistaken—it must be her own reflection staring back. Yet in her mind's eye she saw a foot moving to the accelerator, pressing down. With a cry, she jumped from the car's path. An air horn blew as a truck swept by. Wind swirled and grit stung her face. She cowered against her fender. Had she been a few inches farther into the roadway, she would have been struck.

Unconsciously clutching the shoe, she scrambled into her car and slammed the door. She collapsed against the seat, eyes closed, cradling the shoe to her breast. *Almost hit by a truck.* Her narrow escape overwhelmed everything else. *I could have been killed.*

The frantic pounding of her heart slowed and her thoughts cleared. Why had she thought she had heard her engine revving? In any case, the car couldn't have moved unless thrown into gear. She had been frightened by a trick of sound. *Tired, I'm overtired.* Her attention shifted to the shoes. They were a match, no question. How had they ended up seventy-five miles apart on completely dif-

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ferent roads? She must be right in thinking someone had separated them on purpose. Only, why? It made no sense. Maybe the shoes were haunted. They'd been separated because it was the only way to break their spell.

Such an incredible idea. *Haunted shoes. Imagine.* She didn't believe it, not for a minute. Yet, wasn't it even more incredible that she had come along and matched them up? Denise shuddered violently. It suddenly seemed imperative to hide the shoes. Outside again, she opened the trunk. She tucked the shoes into a paper bag and stuffed the bag between her suitcase and the spare tire. Returning to the driver's seat, she felt foolish. What had she been thinking—that someone would come along and demand his shoes back?

She was punchy from so much driving and from strain. Leaving Paul, the steady driving, the nutty hunt for the shoes . . . After all that, how could she be expected to think straight? Time to head for home.

It was dark when she reached her apartment. Inside, she turned the two door locks and slid the safety chain across. The neighborhood was fairly quiet, but no sense taking chances. Her apartment was tiny, with a kitchenette off the living room and a wide archway that left her bed visible from the door if she didn't pull the curtain. She carried her suitcase and the shoes into the bedroom.

Had it finally sunk into Paul's head that she had left him? To her surprise, she found she no longer cared what he thought or didn't think. Paul no longer mattered. There were more interesting things to occupy her mind. Denise drew the shoes from the bag.

They must have rested against a part of the trunk that conducted heat, for the inside still radiated a soothing warmth. She caressed the lustrous surface of the left shoe with a fingertip. *So smooth, so perfect.* Lifting the tongue, she studied the red marking. Was it really the letter Y? It looked more like an insignia. Forked lightning? Or maybe, a forked tongue. The thought of a forked tongue made her shiver. *Silly, I'm being silly.*

Closing her eyes, she stroked the smooth leather of the shoe against the flesh of her throat and envisioned the man for whom the shoes had been made. A man of purpose, but one who could also be gentle. A man she could totally trust. On impulse, she knelt and placed the shoes side by side on the floor and pushed them under her bed.

"Anytime," she said with a soft chuckle.

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It suddenly seemed important that everything in her apartment be tidy. She unpacked, although it was a chore she usually left for the day after a trip. As she worked, her gaze kept straying to the shoes, their smooth black tips projecting from under the coverlet. They looked so right, as if they had found the place where they belonged.

In her bath, she used a fragrant oil reserved for a special occasion. Why hadn't she taken it on her trip with Paul? Ah, but she had known all along he wasn't worth it. Anticipation shivered over her scented skin as she slipped into her nightgown. She lit candles, their incense mingling pleasantly with the acrid odor of the snuffed match. Illuminated by candlelight, she stood in the bedroom archway and faced the door. She was ready. And waiting. *Waiting for what?*

A knock sounded.

Too startled to react, she could only stare. Who could be at her door at such an hour? Hands clenched, she called, "Who's there?"

"It's me." A masculine voice, that of a stranger.

Me who? His answer told her no more than she had known before. *Who could it be?*

Eyes never leaving the door, Denise pressed her spine against the archway. *Come in,* she said, but only in her mind. Welcoming a stranger . . . what was she thinking? *Come in,* she repeated silently.

The door swung open as if there had been no locks. A man stepped inside. The door closed behind him and Denise saw that the locks and chain were as they had been before. She wanted to scream but had no voice. The man was handsome: black-haired, black-eyed, suave in his dark suit, and impeccably groomed.

He was perfection, right down to his black-stockinged feet.

Denise felt a wild urge to turn and snatch the shoes from under her bed. *Separate them. Fling them wide.* She imagined one of them sailing through her window, the glass shattering, the noise like a gunshot in a cathedral.

"I'm here," he said softly and moved close.

She looked deeply into his eyes and saw herself. Her head whirled. Was she smiling? She must be, for her face in the captured reflection wore a smile. A breathless calm settled around her.

He drew her into his arms. "You'll never be alone again," he said.

She closed her eyes and blindly lifted her face to his.

* * *

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Paul was angry and didn't call Denise for over a week. When he finally tried to phone her she didn't answer, so he let another few days slide by before going to the apartment. After using his keys and finding the chain fastened, he became alarmed and broke his way in. She was dead in her bed, sprawled among tangled sheets.

The autopsy determined that she had expired in a state of extreme dehydration, having consumed neither food nor water for a prolonged period. On her back were awkwardly placed scratches. Although there was no evidence that the wounds were self-inflicted, it seemed the only logical explanation. Her death was ruled the result of natural causes.

Everything in the apartment was exactly as Paul remembered except that under the bed were two shoes he had never seen before. One was a man's black dress shoe, handmade and bearing a strange insignia. The other shoe was also for a man, rundown at the heel and brown.

There was no one except Paul to claim Denise's possessions. After he sold what he could, he put the remainder, including the mismatched shoes—neither was his size, so even if he found their mates, they would have been of no use to him—out for the trash. It rained that evening. Shortly past midnight, a young woman named Lauren trudged by. She was crying. Her husband had recently left her and she was coming home from an evening in a bar in which she had futilely sought someone, anyone, to assuage her loneliness.

The glare of a mercury-vapor streetlamp illuminated a filled trash can. The unusual luster of a man's black shoe lying on top of the debris caught Lauren's eye. Feeling unexplainably uneasy, she searched the shadows that lay beyond the light before drawing close to the can. The shoe was oddly untouched by the rain. Lauren shivered in the chilly air. She told herself she should move on, but instead, she picked up the shoe. Its mate lay under it. Holding them both, she laughed aloud, although she wasn't quite sure why. There was something warm and comforting in the way the shoes looked, the way they felt in her hands.

Impulsively, she clutched them to her breast and started off down the street, her formerly lagging steps now quick, almost eager. What in the world would she do with a pair of men's black dress shoes? She didn't know. But when she got home, she felt certain that something would come to her.

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MAKING CHANGE

by DEANE JORDAN

The January wind skated across Casco Bay, skidded around Peak's Island, then slammed into the rail yard girdling the bottom of Promenade Hill.

I hunched against the gusts. My hands felt numb and smooth. My feet were stumps. Whichever side I leaned into the blast was stripped of heat. With a bare hand, I shoved the shack door open.

Caspar was kneeling on the dirt floor, stuffing shreds of newspaper into the coffee-can stove.

"Should've rode a damn freight to Florida," I chattered, still chilled but at least out of the wind.

"You could catch the eleven-fifteen," he said flatly.

"No thanks. Portland's cold enough. I don't need a ride to Quebec."

Caspar barely nodded. He was an unconcerned man, a thief twice my age who would steal your soul if he could—before or after you were dead. But with a hundred pounds more than him on my frame and a foot of height, I was safe. I met him in Montana, under a washed-out bridge two summers ago. He was quick and resourceful, an aging angler, often outside of the law. We weren't friends or partners. But we wandered together because we knew what to expect from the other. Caspar would pick a pocket when we were close to starving and I'd protect him when back-road fights got rough.

I squatted next to the flaming can. About an inch of air around the tin was warm. The smoke filled the shack. At least my hands wouldn't freeze, if my lungs didn't clog with soot.

"Coffee?" asked Caspar, gesturing like a shivering butler.

"But of course," I mocked, "fourteen lumps, please." Caspar, with an almost graceful sweep of his hand, reached into the arch of his left sneaker. In the light of the smoldering newspaper I watched him pull out a one-dollar bill.

"Apparently, I was luckier than you," he said, waving the George in the air. He was right. I had come back empty-handed after searching phone booths and garbage cans.

"Where'd you get it?"

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"Let's just say the owner won't miss it, until he comes back to his car."

I stared at the buck and thought of what a dollar could buy. A cup of coffee or a cheap hamburger, a two- or three-minute sit in a warm taxi, maybe two long cups of coffee in a warm cafe, like the all-night cafe a few blocks from the rails. I could see Caspar's mind was ahead of me.

"I'll drink," he said, "you sit."

"You've got a deal. I could use some real heat." I stood up and bowed slightly after rubbing my cold-dry hands: "After you."

Caspar led the way across the moonlit rails, the crushed bedding rock complaining under our feet. We slipped into the leafless brush at the bottom of the hill. Above us was a veterans cemetery and a small park with a gun from the battleship *Maine,* a war steamer deep-sixed in Havana's harbor a century ago. We curved around the belly of Promenade Hill. The path was foot-smooth, clear of snow, with an occasional icy ledge for a wall.

I was thinking about the warm cafe and how maybe I could still hitch a lift to Florida, when I bumped into the back of Caspar. He was staring at something off the path. After a second or two he pushed his way through the branches, gesturing for me to follow. Within a few feet of the trail I could see what he saw. A skinny old bum, frozen stiff, white with frost. Caspar bent down next to the body.

"Stripping a bum is bad luck," I warned.

Caspar ignored me and patted him down.

"Our lucky day," he said, reaching into one pocket and pulling out a handful of change. While I stepped back, Caspar rummaged some more. The right wrist carried a watch, an old wind-up with a leather strap. Caspar unbuckled it and slipped it into his jacket. Another pocket produced what looked like a cracked, faded driver's license, most of it washed out, including the photo. Caspar pocketed the old ID. Finished with the clothes, he eyed the old man's well-shod feet, then looked at my ventilated shoes.

"They'll fit you, and they're in better condition."

"I don't want 'em. That's borrowing bad luck."

"Don't be superstitious. You could lose your feet this winter."

I knew he was right, and my feet were damned cold. I tugged the shoes off the old man's frozen toes and tried them on. They felt like they fit, but I didn't know, my feet were too numb to tell. Maybe after sitting in the cafe I'd know for sure. I tightened the laces and

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stood up. Caspar was back on the path again, the dead man's single winter luxury, a scarf, wrapped around his neck.

"Shouldn't we tell the police?" I asked, as I trailed behind him. "He could have been killed."

"You want them to think you did it?" Caspar snapped. "Don't you know dead men tell no tales?" Caspar looked over his shoulder at me. My face must have carried a lot of doubt. "And the dead don't come back to haunt you," he added as he turned back to the trail.

I shut up. We came out of the brush, in the tent of a streetlight, less than a block from the cafe. Caspar pulled up his jacket sleeve and strapped the watch to his wrist.

"What time is it?" he asked, as if I would know. I humped my shoulders. In the lamplight I could see the hands of the watch said it was close to midnight, though I didn't think it was that late. The 11:15 hadn't rolled through yet.

"Just wind it, then set it in the café," I said, not too interested. Caspar nodded and the delicate ratcheting of the stem and spring mingled with our footsteps as we shuffled towards the cafe.

Caspar led the way in. Never had heat felt so good. It pampered my stubbly face, licked my hands, seeped through the holes in my jacket and bathed my feet. I looked around. There were no surprised eyebrows at the sight of us, no thwing of dropping fork or thunk of spoon—a rail-side cafe accustomed to bums.

"Got to order something, fellahs," said a pasty guy in a stained apron behind the counter.

"Two large coffees," replied Caspar, surprising me. Easy to be generous with a dead man's money.

"Cream and sugar in mine," I said, wanting to get the most for the coin.

"Make mine super hot and black," ordered Caspar.

The coffees slid across the counter. I warmed my hand on the mug. Caspar glanced at the wall clock. It was only a few minutes after nine. He set the watch and followed the sweep of the second hand for maybe a minute.

"Good as new," he pronounced, turning his attention to the coffee. While we sat someone put a meal's worth of change in the jukebox and punched up a lot of songs. One was about the wreck of the ship the something-or-other *Fitzgerald,* about sinking on a cold winter's night in a frigid wind. As it played, I happened to glance at Caspar's new watch. It said 11:56. I tapped him on the arm and pointed to the watch.

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"Damn," he said, under his breath, like a man who'd discovered his bank account was skinnier than he thought. He set it again. It was almost 9:30. We nursed the coffees for another few songs, then sat for a while after that. My feet had warmed up and the shoes were beginning to pinch a little. When the clock said ten, I watched Caspar carefully count out the money. One dollar, a dime, a nickel, and three pennies. A dollar and eighteen cents' worth of heat and coffee. We got up without leaving a tip. I was about to open the door when the sweaty guy with a stained apron spoke up.

"Hey guys, you owe me some more money." Caspar wrinkled his face as he turned. He was usually careful about such things.

"I counted out a dollar eighteen," he said.

"Yeah, but the change is Canadian. Ain't worth as much."

Caspar and I wandered over and looked. The dollar was okay but change that should have carried the likes of Roosevelt, Jefferson, and Lincoln was showing Queen Elizabeth.

"I've got no problem with Canadian money," said the beef with the apron, "but it ain't worth as much. You owe me a dime more." Casper quickly reached into his jacket. The change was American. He handed over a dime then slipped the rest back into his pocket.

"Thanks."

Caspar nodded and we braced for the cold. Once outside, Caspar reached into his jacket again. The change that came out was Canadian. I was pondering it all when Caspar peered at the watch. It said 11:57. Suddenly his eyes grew colder than the night. He shoved his hand in his pocket, pulled out the ID and studied it.

I was craning for a look when without a word, Caspar began running towards where we had left the dead bum. I tried to keep up with him but the shoes pinched too much. I slowed to a hobbling walk as he disappeared into the brush. When I finally got back to the body, Caspar was gone. But lying on the dead man's chest was everything Caspar had taken: a small pile of change—American—the watch, scarf, and faded ID.

I picked it all up, kept the still-warm small shoes on, and worked my way back to the shack. Empty. The coffee can was snowball cold. I roamed the rail yard looking for Caspar. While I searched I began to worry about the body and the police. Caspar could have set it all up after finding him. Maybe the old guy had some cash on him and Caspar wanted to travel rather than divvy up. Maybe he'd tell the police I had something to do with the bum being dead just so he could stay warm for the night, maybe even get a free meal. That

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would be like Caspar. He was probably getting me into trouble, and the best thing for me to do was catch the next train south—but I didn't want any problems following me.

I began to backtrack until I got to the path into the brush. I found the body and hiked it onto my shoulder, carrying it like a fat plank. Shoving the branches aside, I worked my way to the edge of the tangle and stood the body up. I leaned it against my back and waited, waited while the wind iced my skin and the dead bum stared at the stars.

Just about the time my feet were starting to freeze again, I heard the Quebec-bound train rumble into the rail yard. It had to slow for the diamond where the rails crisscross, cutting through each other. As I watched, the dark hulk curved through the yard, then slowly began to pick up speed again. That's when I saw Caspar, his moon-pale face searching the tracks for me. He was hiding behind an empty caboose.

Running beside the train, he jumped through the open door of the first empty boxcar. I knew right then our traveling days were over. I could tell by the way he quickly looked around that he was anxious to get out of there, anxious enough to hop a northbound train in January. While I watched him disappear aboard, I saw my opportunity.

As the open door approached, I cradled the hard body in my arms, estimated the speed of the train, then quickly took three long steps, tossing the bum almost into Caspar's lap. I spun and ducked into the brush still seeing the horror on Caspar's face as the body bounced towards him. I didn't look back.

When I got to the streetlight, I checked the change in my pocket. American. Enough for two cups of coffee, maybe a cup and doughnut. I looked at the watch. It said 11:58. I reset it to about 11:17 and headed for the cafe.

I ordered a coffee, then a refill as I sponged up the heat and listened to the jukebox. Caspar, and any of his schemes, was heading northward with company unless he kicked the body out on Casco Bay bridge. I finished the coffee. It was his problem, not mine. I was heading south.

As warm as crisp toast, I slapped some change on the counter, wrapped the scarf around my neck and headed for the door. I knew a tin-can stove that would keep me alive until the 4:00 A.M. came through. Then it was south to Boston, maybe farther if I was lucky and caught an east-coast freight. I could be in Atlanta or Miami in

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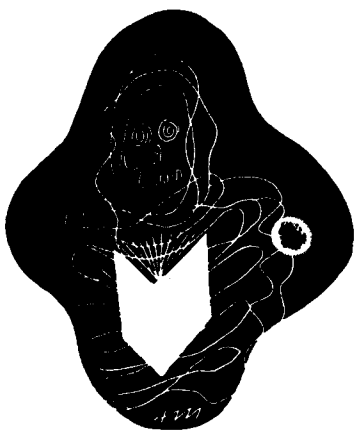
a week or so. I was almost out the door when the apron behind the counter stopped me.

"C'mon, guy, you gave me Canadian again." He had to be wrong. I walked back and looked. Just like before. Where I had dropped American change now sat Canadian coin. That's when I felt the knot that must have tied Caspar's stomach. Slowly, I looked at the watch. It said 11:59. The scarf felt tight around my neck. Shaking, I reached for the ID in my pocket and glanced at it.

I ran from the cafe, leaving the door open behind me. Ignoring my complaining feet, I smashed through the underbrush and began running up the tracks. I knew why Caspar ran, why he had hopped the 11:15, why he left the stuff piled on the body. Ahead of me was the bridge over Casco Bay. I searched the tracks for the body as I ran, my eyes watering in the cold, my lungs icing. It had to be between here and the bridge. He must have shoved it out right after I threw it on. I had to find the body. I'd even jump in the bay for it. Because in my pocket there was a watch ticking to midnight and a not-so-faded ID with my face on it.



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Leslie Meier is the author of two previous stories for EQMM *and a novel entitled* Mail-Order Murder, *published by Viking Books. The following story was inspired by an article she saw about the potentially lethal effects of a popular sweet . . .*

CHOCOLATE

by LESLIE MEIER

Peering anxiously around her apartment door, Minnie Mittelstadt checked the hallway to see if he was there. Since that last dreadful episode, she had decided to take no chances. If he was there, she would simply duck back into her apartment, lock and bolt the door, secure the safety chain, and wait until he was gone.

She had never been so frightened, and she was certain she was lucky to have escaped with her life. Living in the big city held plenty of terrors for a single, middle-aged woman, but Minnie had lived in the Bronx all her life and she wasn't about to leave her pleasant cooperative apartment in the attractive neighborhood known as Riverdale.

Minnie simply took reasonable precautions to guarantee her safety, as she was doing today. She read all the advice the newspapers thoughtfully provided for single women, and carefully followed their suggestions to thwart muggers and purse snatchers. She stayed alert, she remained aware of who was around her, she carried her purse close to her body, and she only carried the cash she absolutely needed. Charge cards, or large amounts of money, she tucked securely into a dress or skirt pocket.

Minnie didn't worry too much about being mugged; the small amount of money she usually carried could easily be replaced. The threat of violence, especially rape, was something else, however. Dear Mama had brought her up believing that a woman must save herself for marriage. She realized she had been saving herself for quite a while, as she was now retired from her job at a downtown department store, but she was determined to preserve that which was most precious to her.

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Minnie never got in an elevator with a stranger, she never spoke to strange men on the street, and she always checked her peephole before opening the door. If she didn't recognize the delivery man or the telephone man, she asked him to hold up his identification, and then she called the company and checked before allowing him to enter her apartment. Minnie didn't believe in taking unnecessary risks. In fact, she never even went out after dark.

That's why it was so frustrating to have this situation taking place right in her own apartment house. However could the members of the cooperative association have voted to allow that dreadful man to move in, and with a dog no less?

Minnie enjoyed the fact that the cooperative allowed pets, as she was the proud owner of a beautiful Siamese cat. King Tut was every bit as regal as his name implied, and he ruled the household with a velvet brown paw. Like all Siamese cats, Tut was stunningly attractive, sporting eight lovely chocolate-brown points: one nose, two ears, one tail, and four paws. His tail curved in a question mark, his sapphire-blue eyes were crossed, and he loved to talk. "Mee-yowww," he would yowl when Minnie returned from a shopping trip. "Where have you been and what have you brought me? I was so lonely without you," he would complain, or so it seemed to Minnie.

Breathtakingly agile and graceful, Tut could jump to the top of the refrigerator in one perfect leap. He loved to sleep up there, soothed by the slight vibration of the motor. He also enjoyed sitting on the cushion Minnie had placed on the window sill, where he could watch people passing in the street. But most of all, he liked to nap in Minnie's lap while she watched TV. He always began by curling up in a neat ball, sleeping like a baby while she gently stroked his silky champagne-beige tummy. Then Tut's purr would rumble with pleasure, and Minnie would think what a lovely little boy he was.

That creature living across the hall, owned by that monster of a man, was something else entirely. Minnie didn't really see why the association allowed dogs. They were messy and unruly, they scratched the woodwork when they jumped frantically begging for walkies, and they were noisy. Yipping, barking, and whining, that awful animal across the hall kept up a constant racket that disturbed poor Tut. And, thought Minnie with a sniff, even the best-trained dog seemed inevitably to have an accident in the hallway sooner or later.

Unpleasant as they might be, Minnie was prepared to tolerate dogs in the building if their owners were responsible. But that was

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not the case in 3A across the hall, as the incident last week so clearly indicated.

Minnie had been minding her own business, waiting for the elevator, with one or two bits of clothing over her arm that she was taking to the dry cleaner. Suddenly, the door of 3A had been thrown open, and the hideous beast ran out, his nails clicking furiously against the tile floor. Growling and snarling, he jumped up and began pulling at the clothes she was holding on her arm. She tried to snatch them away, but the dog bared his teeth at her and began savaging the garments. Frightened, terrified in fact, Minnie dropped her favorite skirt and cowered in the corner as the ferocious animal ripped and shredded it to bits.

"What's going on here?" shouted a deep, masculine voice, and Minnie shrank even farther into the corner as the occupant of 3A charged down the hall. O'Connor was his name, and Minnie couldn't help noticing he had a bristly red mustache and very large teeth, just like his apricot miniature poodle.

"I'm so sorry," said O'Connor, hooking a leash onto the naughty dog's collar. "Please allow me to replace your clothes," he told a horrified Minnie. "This will never happen again, I promise you."

"It had better not," replied Minnie indignantly, as she scuttled down the hall to the safety of her apartment.

Since that awful day, Minnie had been living as if she were under siege. Residents of Beirut and Belfast probably took fewer precautions to guarantee their safety than Minnie did. And it was all because of him, and that dog.

When she came to think about it, as she frequently did, Minnie realized that dogs have a lot of the same unpleasant characteristics as those other threatening animals, men. Like men, dogs are noisy, unruly, and unpredictable. They often have gross and disgusting habits; dogs sniff at everything and lift their legs, men tend to spit in the street. They are both impulsive and overeager, unable to delay gratification. Their animal appetites must be satisfied immediately.

When she remembered her childhood, Minnie recalled the companionable relationship she had enjoyed with dear Mama. Mama had been an excellent housekeeper, and their apartment had always been neat as a pin, and spotlessly clean as well. Mama also practiced home economy, and took pride in carefully managing the household money. She and Minnie often had a salad, or an omelet, for dinner.

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Such a meal was simple to prepare, easy to clean up, and inexpensive, too.

All that would change, however, when Papa was home. He was a merchant seaman, and away for months at a time. But when he returned, the placid way of life she and her mother enjoyed was turned topsy-turvy. His boots would be thrown down carelessly in the hall, his pea jacket tossed over a chair, and the scent of cigar smoke would fill the air. No matter how they tried, she and Mama couldn't keep the house properly tidy when Papa was home.

There were no more tasty cheese and egg meals, either. Men had to have meat, as her mother explained. The stench of cooking fat would linger in the kitchen, and Minnie would have to wash the greasy, blood-smeared plates and platters. The heavy meals would turn her stomach, but Papa loved his meat and potatoes. He also liked a bit of whiskey now and again, and would smack his lips in pleasure as he sipped the amber liquid. Often when Papa drank whiskey of an evening, Minnie would later hear strange bumps and moans coming from the room he shared with dear Mama. Minnie suspected it was a bit of a relief to Mama when Papa's ship sank off the coast of Greenland in an icy winter storm, taking all hands down with it. Poor Papa, Mama would often sigh, stepping back to admire a cushion she had just fluffed or a picture she had straightened.

It was a few days later that Minnie found the answer to her problem. She had just settled down on the couch with a cup of tea, anticipating a peaceful hour with *Better Living* magazine. Tut leaped gracefully up beside her, lowering his rear legs but holding his head and chest upright and occasionally twitching his tail. He watched attentively as she turned the pages, almost as if he could read.

Leafing through the magazine, Minnie was amused to see the cat examine each page intently. She was startled when he suddenly yowled and put his paw on a page, and she was amazed to see the title of the story. "CHOCOLATE," it said in large letters, and just below were the words, "The deadly treat for dogs."

As she read, Minnie was astonished to learn that eating even a small amount of chocolate can cause a severe reaction in a small dog. The most dangerous, the article informed her, was baking chocolate. As little as one half ounce of baking chocolate could be life-threatening to a small dog, such as a miniature poodle, thanks to the theobromine it contained.

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In addition, she was interested to read, dogs are not very discriminating eaters and will apparently wolf down large amounts of chocolate. Even more interestingly, the symptoms might not appear for several hours, she learned.

"Aren't you the clever boy," Minnie told Tut. Tut remained quiet, but narrowed his eyes, and lifted his chin so Minnie could stroke it. As she ran her fingers back and forth under his chin, Minnie could have sworn Tut smiled.

Giving O'Connor's dog the fatal dose turned out to be easier than Minnie imagined. Meeting them in the hall one day, she listened patiently while O'Connor again offered his apologies and tried to pay her for the skirt.

"It's absolutely all right," Minnie assured him. "Just to show there are no hard feelings, let me give the dog a treat. It's chocolate, is that all right?"

"Sure, he loves everything as long as he's not supposed to have it."

That gave Minnie a bit of a start, but O'Connor didn't seem to mean anything by his comment, so she bravely offered the dog a square of baking chocolate. He seemed to enjoy it, and wagged his tail in thanks. Next time she saw O'Connor in the hallway, the dog wasn't with him.

"Where's your doggie?" she asked.

"He's dead. Darnedest thing. Just had a seizure and that was it. Too bad."

"What a shame," commiserated Minnie.

"Actually, he was getting on, and I wasn't all that fond of him. He was my wife's dog and when we got divorced and she went to California, she left him with me. I always felt a little silly walking him," confessed O'Connor.

"Really?" Minnie smiled politely.

"Yeah. So I got another dog, a real man's dog."

"Oh?"

"Wanna meet him? Hold on just a sec and I'll get him."

Minnie pushed the button for the elevator and prepared to wait. Hearing O'Connor's door open, she turned. A huge brown-and-black hound hurtled down the hall towards her, pulling O'Connor behind him. Even though the dog was leashed, the man could just barely control it.

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"This is Brutus," panted O'Connor. "He's a Rottweiler. A real man's dog."

"He's certainly very large—I mean handsome," stammered a horrified Minnie, as the elevator doors slid open. "I just remembered, I forgot something in my apartment. Goodbye."

Employing great self-control, Minnie walked back down the hall. Her hands were shaking so that she had quite a struggle with the locks, but she finally gained the safety of her apartment. Once inside, she ran directly to the coffee table, and began scrabbling through the magazines, finally locating the article. Running her trembling finger down the chart so thoughtfully provided by the author, she found the listing for very large dogs, dogs weighing over seventy-five pounds.

"Oh, Tut," she wailed. "How will I ever get that dog to eat ten jumbo candy bars?"

DETECTIVERSE

ROCKY KNEW

by DON PEYER

Rocky knew I knew he knew
That I had stolen quite a few.
Rocky said I said I would,
Give him half and that I should.
I gave him half, what could I do?
I knew he knew I knew.

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TOP WHODUNITS BY THE TOP WOMEN IN THE FIELD

For the first time ever, here are fifteen of the best mystery stories by women taken from the pages of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.* Thrilling tales by Ruth Rendell, Sara Paretsky, Mary Higgins Clark, Faye Kellerman, Amanda Cross, Joan Hess, Antonia Fraser and eight other terrific writers are included.

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a Horace Rumpole story by

JOHN MORTIMER

Rumpole's keen satirical observations of the social climate of his day are always a treat. But here, in this tale set in 1974, he strikes a particularly poignant note. Criminals, he says, "like the owners of small businesses, seem to have felt the cold winds of the present recession. There just isn't the crime about that there used to be." We may wish the same thing could be said today, but for Horace Rumpole, expert in criminal defense, the situation demands a look into a new line of lawyering that treats of wills, testaments, and the strangely communicated wishes of the dead . . .

RUMPOLE AND THE DEAR DEPARTED

by JOHN MORTIMER

Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs;
Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.
Let's choose executors and talk of wills;
And yet not so—for what can we bequeath
Save our deposed bodies to the ground.

The only reason why I, Horace Rumpole, Rumpole of the Old Bailey, dedicated, from my days as a white-wig and my call to the bar, almost exclusively to a life of crime, should talk of wills, was because of a nasty recession in felonies and misdemeanours. Criminals are, by and large, of an extraordinary Conservative disposition. They believe passionately in free enterprise and strict mone-

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tarist policies. They are against state interference of any kind. And yet they, like the owners of small businesses, seem to have felt the cold winds of the present recession. There just isn't the crime about that there used to be. So when Henry came into my room staggering under the weight of a heavy bundle of papers and said, "Got something a bit more up-market than your usual, Mr. Rumpole; Mowbray and Pontefract want to instruct you in a will case, sir," I gave him a tentative welcome. Even our learned Head of Chambers, Guthrie Featherstone, Q.C., M.P., could scarce forbear to cheer. "Hear you've got your foot in the door of the Chancery Division, Horace. That's the place to be, my dear old chap. That's where the money is. Besides, it's so much better for the reputation of chambers for you not to have dangerous criminals hanging about in the waiting room."

I said something about dangerous criminals at least being alive. The law of probate, so it seemed to me, is exclusively concerned with the dead.

" 'Let's choose executors and talk of wills; and yet not so'—for, besides having nothing to bequeath, Rumpole knows almost nothing about the law of probate."

That is what I told Miss Beasley, the matron of the Sunnyside Nursing Home on the peaceful Sussex coast, when she came to consult me about the testamentary affairs of the late Colonel Ollard. It was nothing less than the truth. I know very little indeed on the subject of wills.

Miss Beasley was a formidable-looking customer: a real heavyweight with iron-grey hair, a powerful chin, and a nose similar in shape to that sported by the late duke of Wellington. She was in mufti when she came to see me (brogues and a tweed suit), but I imagine that in full regimentals, with starched cap and collar, the lace bonnet and medals pinned on the mountainous chest, she must have been enough to put the wind up the bravest invalid.

She gave me the sort of slight tightening of the lips which must have passed, in the wards she presided over, as a smile. "Never you mind, Mr. Rumpole," she said, "the late Colonel wanted you to act in this case particularly. He has mentioned your name on several occasions."

"Oh, really? But Miss Beasley, dear lady, the late Colonel Bollard . . ."

"Colonel Ollard, Mr. Rumpole, Colonel Roderick Ollard, M.C., D.S.O., C.B.E., late of the Pines, Balaclava Road, Cheeveling-on-Sea, and the Sunnyside Nursing Home," she corrected me firmly. "The dear

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departed has come through with your name, perfectly clearly more than once."

"Come through with it, Miss Beasley?" I must say the phrase struck me as a little odd at the time.

"That is what I said, Mr. Rumpole." Miss Beasley pursed her lips.

"We should be alleging fraud against the other side, Mr. Rumpole."

The person who had spoken was Mr. Pontefract, of the highly respected firm of Mowbray and Pontefract, an elderly type of solicitor with a dusty black jacket, a high stiff collar, and the reverent and deeply sympathetic tone of voice of a reputable undertaker. He was someone, I felt sure, who knew all about wills, not to mention graves and worms and epitaphs. And the word he had used had acted like a trumpet call to battle. I felt myself brighten considerably. I beamed on La Beasley and said with confidence:

"Fraud! Now, there is a subject I do know something about. And whom are we alleging fraud against?"

"Mr. Percival Ollard, Mrs. Percival Ollard—" Mr. Pontefract supplied the information.

"That Marcia. She didn't give a toss for the colonel!" Miss Beasley interrupted with a thrust of the chest and a swift intake of breath.

"And young Peter Ollard, their son, aged thirteen years, represented by his parents as guardians, *ad litem*". Mr. Pontefract completed the catalogue of shame.

"The Colonel thought Peter was a complete sissy, Mr. Rumpole!" Miss Beasley hastened to give me the low-down. "The boy didn't give a toss for military history, he was more interested in ballet dancing."

"Young Peter, it appears, had ambitions to enter the West Sussex School of Dance." Mr. Pontefract made this announcement with deep regret.

"You should have heard Colonel Ollard on the subject!" Miss Beasley gave me another tight little smile.

"I can well imagine," I said. "Mr. Pontefract . . . just remind me of the history of Colonel Ollard's testamentary affairs."

I needed to be reminded because Pontefract's instructions, as set out in his voluminous brief, were on the dryish side. As a lawyer, Pontefract was no doubt admirable; as an author he lacked the knack, which many criminal solicitors possess, of grabbing the attention. In fact I had slumbered over his papers and a bottle of Pommeroy's plonk in front of the electric fire in Froxbury Court.

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"Colonel and Percival Ollard were the only two sons of the late Reverend Hector Ollard, rector of Cheeveling-on-Sea," Pontefract started to recap. "They inherited well and by wise investments both became wealthy men. Percival Ollard started a firm known as Ollard's Kitchen Utensils, which prospered exceedingly. During the last six years the brothers never met; and Colonel Roderick Ollard, who was an invalid—"

"It was his heart let him down, Mr. Rumpole. His poor old ticker." Miss Beasley supplied the medical evidence.

"Colonel Ollard was nursed devotedly by Miss Beasley at her nursing home, Sunnyside," Pontefract assured me, and was once again interrupted by Matron.

"He was a real old sport, was the colonel! Often had my incurable ladies in a roar! Quite a schoolboy at heart, Mr. Rumpole. And I'll take my dying oath on this, the Percival Ollards never visited him, not after the first fortnight. They never even wrote to him. Not so much as a little card for a Christmas or birthday."

I was about to "tut-tut" sympathetically, as I felt was expected, when Pontefract took up the narrative. "When the colonel died all we could find was a will he made in 1970, under which his estate would be inherited by his brother Percival, his sister-in-law Marcia, and his nephew, Peter—"

"The ballet dancer!" I remembered.

"Exactly! In equal shares, after a small legacy to an old batman."

"Of course their will's a forgery." Miss Beasley clearly had no doubt about it.

"I thought you said it was a fraud." The allegations seemed to be coming thick and fast.

"A fraud *and* a forgery!"

It was all good, familiar stuff. In some relief I stood up, found and lit a small cigar.

"Concocted by the Percival Ollards," I said gleefully. "Yes, I see it all. You know, even though it's only a probate action, I do detect a comforting smell of crime about this case. Tell me, Miss Beasley. Where do you think the colonel should have left, how much was it, did you say, Mr. Pontefract?"

"With the value of The Pines, when we sell it, I would say, something over half a million pounds, Mr. Rumpole."

Half a million nicker! It was a crock of gold that might command a fee which would even tempt Rumpole into the dreaded precincts

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of the Chancery Division. I sat down and asked Matron the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question.

"Well, of course, he should have left his money to the person who looked after him in his declining years." Miss Beasley said it in all modesty.

"To your good self?" I was beginning to get the drift of this consultation.

"Exactly!" Miss Beasley had no doubt about it. But Pontefract came in sadly, with a little legal difficulty.

"What I have told Miss Beasley is," he said, "that she has no *locus standi.*" I had no doubt he was right but I hoped that the learned Pontefract was about to make his meaning clear to a humble hack. Happily he did so. "Miss Beasley is in no way related to the late colonel."

"In absolutely no way!" Matron was clearly not keen to be associated with the Percival Ollards.

"And she doesn't seem to have been named in any other will."

"We haven't found any other will. Yet." Matron looked more than ever like the Duke of Wellington about to meet her Waterloo.

"So she can't contest the February 1970 will in favour of Peter Ollard. If it fails, she stands to gain . . . nothing." Mr. Pontefract broke the news gently but clearly to the assembled company.

Little as I know of the law of wills, some vague subconscious stirring, some remote memory of a glance at *Chancery in a Nutshell* before diving into the Bar Finals, made me feel that the sepulchral Pontefract had a point. I summed up the situation judicially by saying:

"Of course in law, Miss Beasley, your very experienced solicitor is perfectly right. I agree with what he has said and I have nothing to add."

"There is another law, Mr. Rumpole." Miss Beasley spoke quietly, but very firmly. "The higher law of God's justice."

"I'm afraid you won't find they'll pay much attention to that in the Chancery Division." I hated to disillusion her.

"Miss Beasley insisted we saw you, Mr. Rumpole. But you have only confirmed my own views. Legally, we haven't got a leg to stand on." Mr. Pontefract was gathering up his papers, ready for the "off."

"Well, we'll jolly well have to find one, won't we?" Matron sounded unexpectedly cheerful. "Mr. Rumpole, I won't keep you any longer. I'll be in touch as soon as we find that leg you're looking for."

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And now Miss Beasley stood up in a businesslike way. I felt as though I'd been ordered a couple of tranquilizers and a blanket bath and not to fuss because she'd be round with Doctor in the morning. Before she went, however, I had one question to ask:

"Just one thing, Miss Beasley. You say the late colonel recommended me, as a sound legal adviser?"

"He did indeed! He was mentioning your name only last week," Miss Beasley answered cheerfully.

"Last week? But, Miss Beasley, I understand that Colonel Ollard departed this life almost six months ago."

"Oh yes, Mr. Rumpole," she explained, as though to a child, "that's when he died. Not when he was speaking to me."

At which point I sneezed, and Matron said, "You want to watch that cold, Mr. Rumpole. It could turn into something nasty."

Miss Beasley, of course, was right. The reason I hadn't been able to concentrate with my usual merciless clarity on the law governing testamentary matters was that I had the dry throat and misty eyes of an old legal hack with a nasty cold coming on. A rare burst of duty took me down to the Old Bailey for a small matter of warehouse-breaking, and four nights later saw me drinking, for medicinal reasons, a large brandy, sucking a clinical thermometer, and shivering in front of my electric fire at Froxbury Court, dressed in pyjamas and a dressing gown. She Who Must Be Obeyed looked at me without any particular sympathy. There has never been much of the Florence Nightingale about my wife Hilda.

"Rumpole! That's the third time you've taken your temperature this evening. What is it?"

"It's sunk down to normal, Hilda. I must be fading away."

"Really! It's only a touch of flu. Doctor MacClintock says there's a lot of it about."

"It's a touch of death, if you want my opinion. There's a lot of that about too."

"Well, I hope you'll stay in the warm tomorrow."

"I can't do that! Got to get down to the Bailey. The jury are coming back in my murder in the morning." I sneezed and continued bravely, "I'd better be in at the death."

"That's what you will be in at. If you *must* go traipsing down to the Old Bailey, don't expect me to feel sorry for you."

I was about to say, of course I never expected Hilda to feel sorry for me, when the telephone rang. She rushed to answer it (unlike

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me, she takes an unnatural delight in answering telephones), and announced that a Miss Rosemary Beasley was on the line and wished to communicate with her counsel as a matter of urgency. Cursing the fact that Miss Beasley, unlike my other clients, wasn't tucked up in the remand wing of the nick, safe from the telephone, I took the instrument and breathed into it a rheumy, "Good evening."

Matron came back, loud and clear, "Mr. Rumpole. I am sitting here at my planchette."

"At your *what?*" Miss Beasley had me mystified.

"Sometimes I use the board, or the wine glass, or the cards. Sometimes I have Direct Communication."

"That must be nice for you. Miss Beasley, what *are* you talking about?"

"Tonight I am at the planchette. I have just had such a nice chat with Colonel Ollard."

"With the *late* Colonel Ollard?"

I was, I had to confess, somewhat taken aback. When Matron answered, she sounded a little touchy. "He wasn't late at all. He came through bang on time! It was just nine o'clock when we started chatting. He says the weather over there's absolutely beautiful! It's just not fair, I told him, when we're going through this dreary cold spell."

"Miss Beasley," I asked for clarification, "did Colonel Ollard come over from the dead, simply to chatter to you about the weather?"

"Oh no, Mr. Rumpole. I shouldn't be telephoning you if that were all. He said something *far* more important."

"Oh did he? And can you let me into the secret?" My temperature was clearly rising during this conversation. I longed for bed with both my feet on a hot water bottle.

"The colonel said that Mr. Pontefract had never looked in the tin box where he kept his dress uniform, in the loft at The Pines."

"Well. Suppose Mr. Pontefract never has . . ."

"If he looked there, the colonel told me, Mr. Pontefract would find, wrapped in tissue paper, between the sword and the . . . trousers, a later will, signed by himself in the proper manner."

I could see the way things were drifting and quite honestly I didn't like it at all. The day might not be far distant when Miss Beasley might in fact find herself tucked safely up in the nick.

"Is that what the colonel said?" I asked, warily.

"His very words."

"You're quite *sure* that's what he said . . ."

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"How could I possibly be mistaken?"

"Well, I suppose you'd better ring Pontefract and get him to take a look. I just hope—"

"You hope *what,* Mr. Rumpole?"

"I hope you're not considering anything *dangerous,* Miss Beasley."

After all, what could all this planchette nonsense be but a rather obvious prelude to forgery?

"Of course not! I'm perfectly safe, Mr. Rumpole. I've just been sitting here chatting." Matron sounded her usual brisk self. I tried to remember if there'd ever been a woman forger, with a nursing qualification.

"Yes. Well, if you ring Mr. Pontefract," I suggested, but apparently all that had been taken care of.

"I've done that, Mr. Rumpole. I just thought I'd ring you too, to tell you the joyful tidings. Oh, and Mr. Rumpole. The colonel sent you his best wishes, and he hopes he's been a help to you, giving you a leg to stand on. Cheerio for now! Oh, and he hopes your cold's better."

As I put down the receiver, I felt, as I have said, a good deal worse.

"Who on earth's Miss Rosemary Beasley?" Hilda asked when I had finished sneezing.

"Oh her. She's just someone who seems to be on particularly good terms with the dead."

The next day, still feeling in much the same condition as the late Colonel Ollard, but without the blue skies to cheer me up, I staggered off to the Old Bailey and heard my warehouse-breaker get three years. When the formalities and the official goodbyes were over I walked back to Chambers and there, awaiting me in my room, was the lugubrious Pontefract. He came straight out with the news.

"It was just as she told us, Mr. Rumpole. There was a tin box under a pile of old blankets in the loft at The Pines, which we had overlooked. In it was the full dress uniform of a colonel of the Royal Dorsets."

"And between the sword and trousers?"

"I found a will, apparently dated the first of March, 1974. Over four years after the other will in favour of the Percival Ollards. It revokes all previous wills and leaves his entire estate to—"

"Miss Rosemary Beasley?" I hazarded a guess.

"You've hit it, Mr. Rumpole!"

"It didn't need great powers of divination."

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I couldn't help looking round nervously to see that we weren't in the presence of the mysterious matron.

"Mr. Pontefract, as our client isn't with us today—"

"I'm quite thankful for it, Mr. Rumpole."

"You are? So am I. You know that the late colonel apparently spoke from the other side of the grave, to tip our client off about this will?"

"So I understand, Mr. Rumpole."

"Mr. Pontefract. I know you are accustomed to polite civil law and my mind turns as naturally to crime as a vicar's daughter's does to sex, but . . ."

I didn't know how to make the suggestion which might wound the old gentleman; but he was out with the word before me.

"You suspect *this* will may be a forgery?"

"That thought had crossed your mind?"

"Of course, Mr. Rumpole. There is no field of endeavour in which human nature sinks to a lower depth than in the matter of wills. Your average Old Bailey case, Mr. Rumpole, must seem like a day out with the Church Brigade compared to the skulduggery which surrounds the simplest last will and testament."

As he spoke I began to warm to this man, Pontefract. He was expressing my own opinions fairly eloquently, and I listened with an increased respect as he went on.

"Naturally my first thought was that our client, Miss Beasley, had invented this supernatural conversation in order to direct our attention to a will which she had, shall we say, manufactured?"

"A neutral term, Mr. Pontefract." But well put, I thought. "That was my first thought, also."

"So I took the precaution of having this new-found will examined by a well-known handwriting expert."

"Alfred Geary?"

There is only one handwriting expert Her Majesty's judges pay any attention to. Geary is now an old man peering at blown-up letters through thick pebble glasses, but he is still an irrefutable witness.

"I went, in this instance, and regardless of expense, to Mr. Geary. You approve, sir?"

"You couldn't do better. The courts listen in awe to this fellow's comparison between the *m*'s and the tails on the *p*'s. What did Geary find?"

"That the signature on the will we discovered—"

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"Between the dress sword and the trousers?"

"Is undoubtedly the genuine signature of the late colonel."

It was the one piece of evidence I hadn't expected. If the will was not a forgery, if it were a genuine document, could it possibly follow that the message which led us to its hiding place was also genuine? The mind, as they say, boggled. I was scarcely listening as Mr. Pontefract told me that the Percival Ollards would be attacking our new will on the grounds of the deceased's insanity. It was my own sanity I began to fear for, as I wondered if the deceased colonel would be giving us any more instructions from beyond the grave.

When I got home I was feeling distinctly worse. I mentioned the matter to She Who Must Be Obeyed and she swiftly called my bluff by summoning in the local quack who was round, as he always is, like a shot, in the hope of a fee and a swig of my diminishing stock of sherry (a form of rotgut I seem to keep entirely for the benefit of the medical profession).

"He's not looking in a particularly lively condition, is he?" Doctor MacClintock remarked to Hilda on arrival. "Well, we've got to remember, Rumpole's no chicken."

I was unable to argue with the doctor's diagnosis, as it was undoubtedly true, and what's more, I had a clinical thermometer stuck between my jaws. I could only grunt a protest when Hilda, with quite unnecessary hospitality, said, "You will take a glass of sherry, won't you, Doctor? So good of you to come."

I mean to say, when I do my job of work, the judge doesn't start proceedings with, "So nice of you to drop in Rumpole, do help yourself to my personal store of St. Emilion." I was going to say something along these lines when the gloomy Scots medico removed the thermometer, but he interrupted me with, "His temperature's up. I'm afraid it's a day or two in bed for the old warrior."

"A day or two in bed? You'll have to tell him, Doctor, he's got to be sensible."

"Oh, I doubt very much if he'll feel like being anything else."

I began to wish they'd stop talking as if I'd already passed on, and so I intruded into the conversation.

"Bed? I can't possibly stay in bed—"

"You're no chicken, Rumpole. Doctor MacClintock warned you."

I noticed that the thirsty quack had downed one glass of Pommeroy's pale Spanish-style and was getting a generous refill from the family.

"You warned me? What did you warn me about?"

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"You're not getting any younger, Rumpole."

"Well, it hardly needs five years' ruthless training in the Edinburgh medical school and thirty years in general practice to diagnose that!"

"He's becoming crotchety," Hilda said, with satisfaction. "He's always crotchety when he's feeling ill."

"Yes, but what are you warning me about? Pneumonia, botulism, Parkinson's disease?"

"There is an even more serious condition, Rumpole," the doctor said. "I mean there's no reason why you shouldn't go on for a good few years, provided you take proper precautions."

"You're trying to warn me about death!"

"Well, death is rather a strong way of putting it."

The representative of the medical profession looked distressed, as though he realized that if Rumpole dropped off the twig there might be no more free sherry.

"Odd thing about the dead, Doctor." I decided to let him into a secret. "You may not know this. They may not have lectured you on this at your teaching hospital, but I can tell you on the best possible authority, the dead are tremendously keen on litigation. Give me a drink, Hilda. No, not that jaundiced and medicated fluid. Give me a beaker full of the warm south, full of the true, the blushful Château Pommeroy's ordinary claret! Dr. MacClintock, you can't scare me with death. I've got a far more gloomy experience ahead of me."

"I doubt that, Rumpole," said the Scot, sipping industriously. "But what exactly do you mean?"

"I mean," I said, "I've got to appear in the Chancery Division."

The Chancery Division is not to be found, as I must make clear to those who have no particular legal experience, in any of my ordinary stamping grounds like the Old Bailey or Snaresbrook. It is light years away from the Uxbridge Magistrates' Court. The Chancery Division is considered by many, my learned Head of Chambers in particular, to be an extremely up-market Court. There cases are pleaded by lawyers who spring from old county families in a leisurely and courteous manner. It is a tribunal, in fact, which bears the same sort of relation to Inner London Sessions as the restaurant at Claridges does to your average transport café.

The Chancery Division is in the Law Courts, and the Law Courts, which prefer to be known as the Royal Courts of Justice, occupy a stately position in the Strand, not a wig's throw from my Chambers

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at Equity Court in the Temple. The Victorian building looks like the monstrous and overgrown result of a misalliance between a French château and a Gothic cathedral. The vast central hall is floored with a mosaic which is constantly under repair. There are many church-shaped windows and the ancient urinals have a distinctly ecclesiastical appearance. I passed into this muted splendour and found myself temporary accommodation in a robing room where there was, such is the luxurious nature of five-star litigation, an attendant in uniform to help me on with the fancy dress. Once suitably attired, I asked the way to the Chancery Division.

I knew that Chancery was a rum sort of Division, full of dusty old men breaking trusts and elegant young men winding up companies. They speak a different language entirely from us Criminals, and their will cases are full of "dependent relative revocation" and "testamentary capacity," and the nice construction of the word "money." As I rose to my hind legs in the Court of Chancery, I felt like some rustic reveller who has blundered into a convocation of bishops engaged in silent prayer. Nevertheless, I had a duty to perform, which was to open the case of "In the Estate of Colonel Roderick Ollard, deceased. Beasley *v.* Ollard and ors." The judge, I noticed, was a sort of pale and learned youth, probably twenty years my junior, who had looked middle-aged ever since he got his double first at Balliol, and who kept his lips tightly pursed when he wasn't uttering some thinly veiled criticism of the Rumpole case. This chilly character was known, as I discovered from the usher, as Mr. Justice Venables.

"May it please you, my Lord," I fished up a voice from the murky depths of my influenza and put it on display, "in this case, I appear for the plaintiff, Miss Rosemary Beasley, who is putting forward the true last will of a fine old soldier, Colonel Roderick Ollard. The defendants, Mr. and Mrs. Percival Ollard and Master Peter Ollard, are represented by my learned friends, Mr. Guthrie Featherstone, Q.C. . . ."

It was true. The smooth-talking and diplomatic Head of our Chambers had collared the brief against Rumpole. Never at home in the rough and tumble of a nice murder, the Chancery Division, as I have said, was just the place for Guthrie Featherstone.

". . . and Mr. . . ." I made a whispered inquiry and said, "Mr. Loxley-Parish."

Guthrie had got himself, as a Chancery Junior, an ancient who'd no doubt proved more wills than I'd had bottles of Pommeroy's plonk. I turned, as usual, to the jury box and got in the meat of my oration.

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"My client, Miss Beasley, is the matron and presiding angel of a small nursing home known as Sunnyside, on the Sussex coast. There she devotedly nursed this retired warrior, Colonel Ollard, and was the comfort and cheer of his declining years."

Mr. Justice Venables was giving a chill stare over the top of his half glasses, and clearing his throat in an unpleasant manner. Here was a judge who appeared to be distinctly unmoved by the Rumpole oratory. I carried on, of course, regardless.

"Declining years, during which his only brother, Percival, and Percival's wife, Marcia, never troubled to cross the door of Sunnyside to give five minutes of cheer to the old gentleman, and Master Peter Ollard was far too busy cashing the postal orders the colonel sent him to send a Christmas card to his elderly uncle."

It was time, I thought, that the Chancery Court heard a little Shakespeare.

> "Blow, blow thou winter wind
> Thou art not so unkind . . .
> As man's ingratitude."

At which point the judicial throat-clearing took on the sound of words.

"Mr. Rumpole," the judge said. "I think perhaps you need reminding. That jury box is empty."

I looked at it. His Lordship was perfectly right. The twelve puzzled and honest citizens, picked off the street at random, were conspicuous by their absence. Juries are not welcome in the Chancery Division. This was one of the occasions, strange to Rumpole, of a trial by judge alone. . . .

"It is therefore, Mr. Rumpole, not an occasion for emotional appeals." The judge continued his lesson. "Perhaps it would be more useful if you gave me some relevant dates and a comparison of the two wills."

"Certainly, my Lord," I said, always anxious to oblige. "By his true last will of the first of March, 1974, the late colonel recognized the care of a devoted matron—"

"Just the facts, Mr. Rumpole. Just give me the plain facts," snapped the old spoilsport.

"And the plain fact is, under the previous will of the fifteenth of February, 1970, the Percival Ollards had managed to scoop the pool."

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"Scoop the pool" was, it seemed, not a phrase or saying in current use in the Chancery Division.

"You mean, I suppose," the judge corrected me, "that Mr. Percival Ollard, together with his wife and son were the sole beneficiaries of the deceased's residuary estate."

Somehow I managed to finish giving the judge the brief facts of the case without open warfare breaking out. But the atmosphere was about as convivial as a gathering of teetotal undertakers.

I then called Matron to give evidence. She filled the witness box with authority, she was dressed in respectable and respectful black, she gave her answers in ringing and resonant tones, and yet I could tell that the judge didn't like her. As she gave her touching description of her devoted care of the late colonel, and her harrowing account of the Percival Ollards' neglect of their relative, Mr. Justice Venables looked upon Matron as though she was a person who had come to his Court for one reason only, money. Well, it was a charge which might, with equal justice, be levelled against me, and Guthrie Featherstone, and even, let it be said, the learned judge.

"Finally, Matron," I asked the last question with a solemnity which would have deeply moved the jury, if there had been a jury, "what did you think of the deceased?"

"He had his little ways, of course, but he was always a perfect gentleman." She looked at the judge; he averted his eye.

"What did you call each other?" I asked.

"It was always 'Matron' and 'Colonel Ollard.' "

"But you were friends?"

"It was always on a proper basis, Mr. Rumpole. I don't know what you're suggesting." Miss Beasley gave me an "old-fashioned" look, whereat Featherstone, seeing a rift in our ranks, levered himself to his hind legs and addressed a sympathetic judge.

"I hope my learned friend isn't suggesting anything, by way of a leading question . . . ?"

"Certainly not, my Lord!" And I went on before His Lordship had time to answer. "Miss Beasley, during the years that Colonel Ollard was with you, did Mr. Percival Ollard visit him at all?"

"I think he came over once or twice in the first couple of weeks. Once he took the colonel for a run on the Downs, I think, and a tea out."

Featherstone had the grace to subside, and my questioning continued.

"But after that?"

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"No. He never came at all."

"And his family, his wife Marcia, and the young Nijinsky?"

"The *what,* Mr. Rumpole?" Mr. Justice Venables was not amused.

"Master Peter Ollard, my Lord. A lad with terpischorean tastes."

"Oh no. I never saw them at all."

"Yes. Thank you. Just wait there a moment, will you, Miss Beasley?" I subsided and Guthrie Featherstone rose. I had no particular worries. The middle-of-the-road M.P. was merely a middle-of-the-road cross-examiner.

"Miss Beasley. You say that Colonel Ollard had his little ways," Guthrie began in a voice like hair oil poured on velvet.

"He did, yes." Matron faced the old darling with confidence.

"Is Miss Mary Waterhouse one of your nurses?"

"She *was* one of my nurses. Yes." The name brought a small sign of disapproval from the generalissimo of Sunnyside.

"Did the colonel take boiled eggs for breakfast?" Featherstone asked what I thought at the time was not much of a question.

"On some days. Otherwise he had bacon and sausage."

"And did the colonel once fling his boiled eggs at Nurse Waterhouse and instruct her, and I quote, 'To sit on the bloody things and hatch them out'?"

I let out a small guffaw, in which the judge didn't join. I even began to warm to the memory of Colonel Ollard.

"He . . . may have done," Matron conceded.

"The colonel disliked hard-boiled eggs." Featherstone, bless his timid old heart, seemed to be making a fair deduction.

"He disliked a lot of things, Mr. Featherstone. Including young boys who indulged in ballet lessons." Matron tried to snick a crafty one through the slips, and, of course, fell foul of the judge immediately.

"Just answer the questions, Miss Beasley. Try not to score points off the other side," Venables, J., warned her. Again, I got the strong impression that His Lordship hadn't exactly *warmed* to Matey.

"Did he also dislike slices of toast which were more than exactly four inches long?"

"The colonel liked things just so, yes," Miss Beasley admitted.

"And did he measure his toast with a slide rule each morning to make sure it was the correct length?"

"Seems a perfectly reasonable thing to do," I said to Mr. Pontefract, in what I hoped was an audible mutter.

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"Did you say something, Mr. Rumpole?" the judge inquired coldly. I heaved myself to my feet.

"I just wondered, my Lord, does the fact that a man measures his toast mean that he's not entitled to dispose of his property exactly as he likes?"

At this, the old sweetheart on the bench decided to do his best to polish up my manners.

"Mr. Rumpole," he said. "Your turn will come later. Mr. Guthrie Featherstone is cross-examining. In the Chancery Division we consider it improper to interrupt a cross-examination, unless there's a good reason to do so."

Of course I bowed low, and said, *"If* your Lordship pleases. As a rank outsider I am, of course, delighted to get your Lordship's instructions on the mysteries of the Chancery Division." I supposed old Venables thought that down the Old Bailey we interrupted opponents by winking at the jury and singing sea shanties. It was then my turn to subside and let Featherstone continue.

"Let me ask you something else, Matron. Colonel Ollard had fought, had he not, at the battle of Anzio?"

"That was where he won his Military Cross," said Miss Beasley, with some understandable pride in the distinction of her late patient.

"Yes, of course. Very commendable."

That was a tribute, of course, coming from Featherstone. I seemed to remember that he did his military service in the Soldiers' Divorce Division.

Then Featherstone asked another question. "Matron," he purred with his usual charm, "did Colonel Ollard tell you that he had frequently discussed the battle of Anzio with the Prime Minister, the late Sir Winston Churchill?"

"I know that Sir Winston was always interested in Colonel Ollard's view of the war, yes." Miss Beasley sounded proud, and even the judge looked impressed.

"And that he had also discussed it with Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery of Alamein?"

"Colonel Ollard called him 'Bernard.' "

"And with the then Soviet leader, Mr. Stalin. Did Colonel Ollard call him 'Joseph'?" Oh dear, I sighed to myself, things were becoming grim when Featherstone tried to make a funny.

"No. He always called him 'Mr. Stalin,' " Miss Beasley answered primly.

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"Very respectful. If I may say so." Featherstone gave the judge a chummy little smile and then turned back straight-faced to the witness.

"You know he told Nurse Waterhouse, one morning last October, that he had been talking to Sir Winston, Lord Montgomery, and Mr. Stalin the evening before. Does that surprise you?" I had the awful feeling that Featherstone had struck gold. There was a sudden silence in Court as Pontefract and I held our breath, waiting for Matron's answer.

When it came, it was a simple, "No."

"You say it *doesn't* surprise you, Miss Beasley?" Venables, J., leaned forward, frowning unpleasantly.

"Not in the least, my Lord." The answer was positively serene. I wanted to tell the Judge not to interrupt the cross-examination, after all, we didn't do that sort of thing in the Chancery Division. But Featherstone, as he went on, was doing quite well, even without a little help from the judge.

"Nurse Waterhouse will also say that Colonel Ollard told her that he had been chatting to Alexander the Great, the Emperor Napoleon, and the late duke of Marlborough," my opponent suggested.

"Well, of course he would, you know." Miss Beasley smiled back at him.

"He would say that because he was suffering from mental instability?"

"Of course not!" The witness was outraged. "The colonel had as much mental stability as you or I, Mr. Featherstone."

"Speak for yourself, Miss Beasley." Oh, very funny, Featherstone, I thought. What a talent! He ought to go on the Halls.

"Why did you say that the colonel *would* speak to those gentlemen?" Featherstone asked for clarification.

"Because they were all keenly interested in his subject," Miss Beasley explained, as though to a rather backward two-year-old.

"Which was?"

"Military matters."

"Oh, military matters. Yes. Of course." Featherstone paused, and then asked politely, "But all the names I have mentioned, Churchill and Montgomery, Marlborough and Napoleon, Stalin and Alexander the Great. They're all *dead,* aren't they, Matron?"

"Yes, indeed. But that wouldn't have worried the colonel." She gave the Opposition Leader a patient smile. "Colonel Ollard was

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most sympathetic to people who were ill. Being dead wouldn't have put him off at all."

"But did the colonel think he *could* talk to those deceased gentlemen?"

"Oh yes. Of course he could."

As Pontefract and I began to see the last will of Colonel Ollard going up in smoke, the judge said, "You really believe that, Miss Beasley?"

I must say the answer that Matron gave was not particularly helpful. She merely looked at the judge with some pity and said, "*You* could talk to the Emperor Napoleon, my Lord. If *you* were a believer."

"A believer, Miss Beasley?" No doubt a churchwarden and chairman of the Parish Council, the judge looked more than a little irked by her reply.

"A believer in communication with the other side." At least she had the grace to explain.

"And both you and Colonel Ollard were believers?" Featherstone led her gently on, down the primrose path to disaster.

"Oh yes. We had that much in common."

"Can you communicate with the late Joseph Stalin, Miss Beasley?" It was a shot in the dark by Featherstone, but it scored a bull's eye.

"Of course I could," Miss Beasley said modestly. "But let's just say I wouldn't care to."

"Perhaps not. But can you communicate, for instance, with the late Colonel Ollard?"

"Yes indeed." She had no doubt about that.

"When did you last do so, Miss Beasley?" said the judge, following his leader, Featherstone, like a bloodhound.

"Yesterday evening, my Lord."

"Oh dear! Oh, my ears and whiskers!" I groaned to myself as the psychic Matron blundered on, addressing her remarks to the learned judge.

"And I may say that the Colonel is very distressed about this case, my Lord. Very distressed indeed. In fact, he thinks it's a disgraceful thing to argue about it when he'd made his will perfectly clear and left it in his uniform box. I wouldn't like to tell you, my Lord, the things that the colonel had to say about his brother Percy."

"I think you had better not, Miss Beasley." Featherstone brought her smoothly to a halt. "That would be hearsay evidence. We shall

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have to wait and see whether my learned friend Mr. Rumpole calls the deceased gentleman as a witness."

Oh hilarious, I told myself bitterly. Guthrie Featherstone is being most hilarious. My God, he's working well today!

We, that is, Matron, Mr. Pontefract, and self, had luncheon in the crypt under the Law Courts, a sepulchral hall, where, it seemed, very old plaice and chips come to die. Miss Beasley's legal team were not in an optimistic mood.

"The judge doesn't like you all that much I'm afraid, Miss Beasley." I thought it best to break the news to her gently.

"Never mind, Mr. Rumpole. The feeling is entirely mutual." She looked, all things considered, ridiculously cheerful.

"If you take my advice, Miss Beasley, you should go for a settlement." Pontefract was trying to talk some sense into her. "Save what you can from the wreckage. You see, once you had to admit that the late colonel used to talk to the Emperor Napoleon—"

"What's wrong with talking to the Emperor Napoleon?" Miss Beasley frowned. "He can be quite charming when he puts his mind to it."

"I don't think the judge is likely to accept that," I warned her.

"You'd talk to the Emperor Napoleon, I'm sure, if he came across to you." Miss Beasley didn't seem to be getting the drift of my argument. I put it more bluntly.

"Mr. Pontefract is right. The time has come to chuck in the towel. On the best terms we can manage."

"You mean, surrender?" She looked at us both, displeased.

"Well, on terms, Miss Beasley." Mr. Pontefract tried to soften the blow, but her answer came like the bugle call which set off the Charge of the Light Brigade.

"Colonel Ollard will never surrender!" she trumpeted. "Anyway, you haven't cross-examined that wretched Percy Ollard yet. The colonel says Mr. Rumpole's a great cross-examiner!"

"That's very kind of him." I tried to sound modest.

"He says he'll never forget reading your cross-examination about the bloodstains in the Penge Bungalow Murders. He read every word of it, in the Sunday paper."

"My dear lady. That was thirty-five years ago. Anyway, I had a jury to play on in that case. I'm at my best with a jury. This is a cold-blooded trial in the Chancery Division, by judge alone, and that judge is distinctly unfriendly."

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"The colonel says, 'Mr. Rumpole will hit my brother Percy for six.' " She repeated the words as if they were Holy Writ.

"Tell the colonel," I asked her, "that Mr. Rumpole isn't at his best, without a jury."

A trial without a jury is like an operation without anaesthetic, or a luncheon without a glass of wine. "Shall we drown this old fish, Pontefract, my old darling," I suggested, "in a sea of cooking claret?"

What I can't accept about spiritualism is the idea of millions of dead people (there must be standing room only in the Other Side) kept hanging about just waiting to be sent for by some old girl with a Ouija board in a Brighton boarding house, or a couple of table-tappers in Tring, for the sake of some inane conversation about the Blueness of the Infinite. I mean at least when you're dead you'll surely be spared such tedious social occasions. Nevertheless, there was Colonel Ollard apparently at Matey's beck and call, ready and willing to cross the Great Divide and drop in on her at the turn of a card or the shiver of a wine glass. I was expressing some of these thoughts to Hilda in a feverish sort of way that evening as I hugged my dressing gown round me and downed medicinal claret by the electric fire in Froxbury Court.

"Really, Rumpole," said She, "don't be so morbid."

"I can smell corruption." I sneezed loudly. "The angel of death is brushing me with his wings."

"Rumpole, Dr. MacClintock has told you it's only a cold."

"Dr. MacClintock gave me a warning, on the subject of death." At which there was a ring at the door, and Hilda said, "Oh good heavens. That's never the front doorbell!"

With a good deal of clucking and tutting, Hilda went out to the hall and eventually ushered Miss Rosemary Beasley, who appeared to be carrying some kind of plastic holdall, into the presence of the sick. When she asked me how I was, I told her I was dying.

"Well, don't die yet, Mr. Rumpole. You've got our case to win."

"Don't you think I could conduct it perfectly well from beyond the grave?" I asked Matron.

"Now you're teasing me! Your husband is the most terrible tease," she told a puzzled Hilda. "Listen to this, Mr. Rumpole. The colonel says that he has an urgent message for you. He'll deliver it here tonight. So I've brought the board."

"The what?"

"The planchette, of course."

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To my dismay, Matron then produced, from her black plastic hold-all, a small heart-shaped board on castors, which she plonked onto our dining table. There was paper fixed on the board, and Miss Beasley held a pencil poised over it and the board then moved in a curious fashion, causing writing to appear on the paper. It looked illegible to me, but Miss Beasley deciphered some rather cheeky communications from a late and no doubt unlamented Red Indian Chief who finally agreed to fetch Colonel Ollard to the planchette. Tearing himself away from the Emperor Napoleon, the colonel issued his orders for the day, emerging in Miss Beasley's already somewhat masculine voice as she read the scribbles on the board. "The colonel says, 'Hullo there, Rumpole,' " Miss Beasley informed us.

"Well, answer him, Rumpole. Be polite!" Hilda appeared enchanted with the whole ludicrous performance.

"Oh, hullo there, Colonel." I felt an idiot as I said it.

"It's very blue here, Rumpole. And I am very happy," Miss Beasley came through as the late holder of the Military Cross.

"Oh good." What else could I say?

"Tomorrow you will cross-examine my brother Percival."

"Well, I hope to. I'm not feeling . . ." here I sneezed again, "quite up to snuff."

"Brace up, Rumpole! No malingering. Tomorrow you will cross-examine my brother in Court." Miss Beasley relayed Colonel Ollard's instructions.

"Yes, Colonel. Aye, aye, sir."

"Ask him what we said to each other when he visited me in the nursing home, and he drove me up to the Downs. Ask him what the conversation was when we had cream tea together at the Bide-A-Wee tearooms. Go on, Rumpole. Ask Percy that!" Colonel Ollard may have been a very gallant officer and an inspired leader of men. I doubted if he was a real expert in the art of cross-examination.

"Is it a good question?" I asked the deceased, doubtfully.

"Percy won't like it. Just as Jerry didn't like cold steel. Percy will run a mile from that question," Miss Beasley croaked.

"Colonel, I make it a rule to decide on my own cross-examination." I wanted to make the position clear, but the answer came back almost in a parade-ground bellow.

"Ask that question, Rumpole. It's an order!"

"I'll . . . I'll consider it." I suppose it doesn't do to hurt the feelings of the dead.

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"Do so! Oh, and see you over here some time." At which, it seemed, the consultation was over and Colonel Ollard returned to some celestial bowling-green to wile away eternity. It was perfectly ridiculous, of course. I knew quite well that the deceased colonel wasn't manipulating the planchette. But, as for asking his question, I could tell by the judge's attitude next morning that we had absolutely nothing to lose.

Percival Ollard was not, I thought, a particularly attractive-looking customer. The successful manufacturer of kitchen utensils had run to fat, he had a bristling little ginger moustache and small flickering eyes that seemed to be looking round the Court for ways of escape. Featherstone led him smoothly through his evidence in chief and then I rose to cross-examine. The learned judge put a damper on my first question.

"I'm really wondering," he said, "how much longer this estate is going to be put to the expense of this apparently hopeless litigation."

"Not long, my Lord," I said with a confidence I didn't feel, "after I have cross-examined this witness." And I turned to the witness box.

"Mr. Percival Ollard. Were you on good terms with your brother, before he went into the nursing home?"

"Extremely good terms. We saw each other regularly, and he always sent my boy, Peter, a postal order for Christmas and birthdays."

"That was before the colonel started talking to the dead?" the judge asked in a way unfriendly to Rumpole.

"Yes, my Lord." Percy looked gratefully at my Lord.

"Before he became, shall we say, eccentric in the extreme?" the judge went on.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Very well." Venables, J., now seemed to have worn himself out. "Carry on, if you must, Mr. Rumpole."

"Two weeks after he went into the nursing home, you took him for a drive on the Downs?" Rumpole carried on.

"I did, yes." Percy's nervousness seemed to have returned, although I couldn't imagine why the memory of tea on the Downs posed any sort of threat to him.

"You were then on good terms?"

"Yes."

"You shared tea, scones, and clotted cream at the Bide-A-Wee café?" It was strange the effect on the witness of this innocent ques-

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tion. He took out a silk handkerchief, wiped his forehead and had to force himself to answer, "Yes, we did."

"And talked?"

"We talked, yes." Percy answered so quietly that the judge was constrained to tell him to speak up.

"And after that conversation you and your brother never met or spoke to each other again?"

There was a long pause. Had I stumbled, guided by a dead hand, on some vital piece of evidence? I couldn't believe it.

"No. We never did."

"And he made a will cutting out your family, and leaving all his considerable property to my client, Miss Beasley?"

"He made an *alleged* will, Mr. Rumpole," the judge was at pains to remind me.

I bowed respectfully, and said, "If that's what you call it in the Chancery Division, yes, my Lord. What I want to ask *you,* Mr. Percival Ollard, is simply this—what did you and your brother say to each other at the Bide-A-Wee café?"

Now the pause seemed endless. Percy looked at Featherstone and got no help. He looked at his wife and his ballet-dancing son. He looked vainly at the doors and the windows, and finally his desperate gaze fell on the learned judge.

"My Lord. Must I answer that question?" he said.

"Mr. Rumpole, do you press the question?" His Lordship asked me with distaste.

"My Lord, I do." For some reason, I was on to a good thing, and I wasn't letting it go.

"Then it is relevant and you must answer it, Mr. Ollard." At least the judge knew his business.

"My L-L-Lord," Percival Ollard stammered. He was clearly extremely distressed. So distressed that the judge had time to look at the clock and relieve the witness's agony for an hour. "I see the time," he said. "You may give us your answer after luncheon, Mr. Percival Ollard. Shall we say, two o'clock . . . ?"

We all rose obediently to our hind legs, with Rumpole muttering, "Bloody Chancery Judge. He's let old Percy off the hook."

Miss Beasley vanished somewhere at lunchtime, and when I had returned from a rather unhappy encounter with the plaice in the crypt, I found Guthrie Featherstone waiting for me outside the Court.

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He offered me a cigarette, which I refused, and he lit my small cigar with a gold lighter.

"Horace," he said, "we've always got on pretty well at the Bar."

"Have we, Guthrie?"

"My client has come to a rather agonizing decision."

"You mean he's going to answer my question?"

"It's not that exactly. You see, Horace, we're chucking in the sponge. Our hands are up. We surrender! Matron can have her precious will. We offer no further evidence."

You could have knocked me down with a Chancery brief, but I tried to sound nonchalant. "Oh really, Featherstone," I said, "that's very satisfactory." It was also somewhat incredible. But Guthrie, it became clear, had other matters on his mind.

"I say, Rumpole. A fellow must be certain of his fee. You'll let me have my costs out of the estate, won't you?"

"I suppose so." I warned him, "I'd better just check."

"With your client?"

"Not *only* with her," I said, "with the deceased. I mean it's his money, isn't it?" And I left him thinking, no doubt, that old Horace Rumpole had completely lost his marbles.

When Matron came into view I put the proposition to her; I told her that the Percival Ollards would give her all the boodle, only provided that Guthrie, and their other lawyers, got their costs out of the estate. She and the dear departed must have had a convivial lunch together, agreement was reached, and the deal was on. With about as much joy and enthusiasm as King John might have shown when signing Magna Carta, Mr. Justice Venables pronounced, in the absence of further argument, for the will of the first of March, 1974, benefiting Miss Beasley, and against the earlier will which favoured the Percival Ollards. All parties were allowed their costs out of the estate.

When we came out of Court, Matron seized my hand in her muscular grasp.

"Thanks most awfully, Mr. Rumpole," she said. "The colonel knew you'd pull it off and hit them for six."

"Miss Beasley. May I call you 'Matey'?"

"Please."

"What's the truth of it? What did the brothers say to each other over the scones and Darjeeling?"

There was a pause, and then Miss Beasley said with a small, secret smile, "How would I know, Mr. Rumpole? Only the colonel and his brother know that."

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* * *

However, I was not to be left in total ignorance of the truth of "In the Estate of Colonel Ollard, deceased." After we had taken off our robes, Guthrie Featherstone did me the honour of inviting me to crack a bottle of claret at the Sheridan Club, and, as he had given me my first (and my last) Chancery will, I did him the honour of accepting. As we sat in a quiet room, under the portraits of old actors and even older judges, Featherstone said, "No reason why you shouldn't know, Rumpole. Your client had been Percy's mistress for years."

"Miss Beasley, Matey, the old dragon of the nursing home, his *mistress!*" I was astonished, and I let my amazement show. "His *what?*"

"Girlfriend." Featherstone made it sound even more inappropriate.

"It seems odd, somehow, calling a stout, elderly woman a 'girlfriend.' Are you trying to tell me, Guthrie, intimacy actually took place?"

"Regularly, apparently. On a Wednesday. Matron's afternoon off. But when Colonel Roderick Ollard went into Sunnyside she dived into bed with *him,* and deserted Percy. The meeting at the tearoom was when the colonel told his brother all about it and said he meant to leave his money to Rosemary Beasley."

I was silent. I drank claret. I began to wonder where the planchette came in.

"But why couldn't your client have *told* us that?" I asked my ex-opponent.

"His wife, Rumpole! His wife Marcia! She's a battle-axe and she was kept completely in the dark about Matey. It seems there would have been hell to pay if she'd found out. So we had to settle."

"Well, well, Featherstone. Matron, the *femme fatale.* I'd never have believed it."

What did I believe? That the colonel spoke from the grave? Or that Matron invented all the séances to tell us a truth which would have caused her deep embarrassment to communicate in any other way? As it was, she had told me nothing.

All I knew was that I didn't fancy the idea of the "other side." I knew I shouldn't care for long chats with Colonel Ollard and the Emperor Napoleon even if Joseph Stalin were to be of the party. Dying, as far as I was concerned, had been postponed indefinitely.

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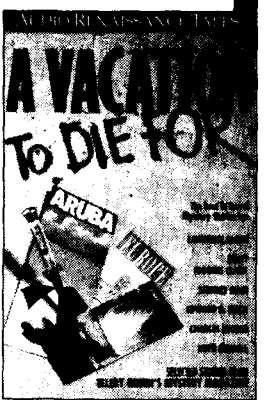

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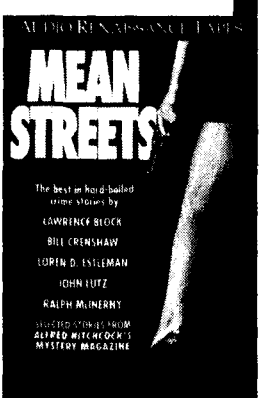

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The desk clerk sat in his little yellow alcove and grinned across the curving yellow counter at his guest, his elbow propped on a Chicago phone book that looked old enough to have Mrs. O'Leary listed. The grin kept growing on his face, and a laugh worked its way in gruff chuckles from his belly.

"It's what?" he finally whooped.

"It's glued to my face," Louis said.

MASQUERADE

by JOHN M. O'TOOLE

Pausing in the alley, the man in the brand-new custom-tailored suit set his attaché case down. Then he rummaged through a trash can, found a curled slice of pizza and hungrily devoured it.

He had lost all his money in a string of bad investments. After that his wife had left him. His credit cards had been canceled. The bank had foreclosed on his mortgage, and thirty-six hours ago a pair of sheriff's deputies had forcibly removed him from his luxury condo. He'd been lucky to escape with a few personal items—handkerchiefs, underwear, a toothbrush, and soap—hastily packed inside his attaché case.

He sat himself down on the alley's crumbling pavement, leaned his back against the white stucco wall of a motel. He closed his eyes and longed for oblivion. The shadows in the alley soon merged with darkness, and Louis Walsh, exhausted, drifted quickly into sleep.

He awoke the next morning with his head on a pillow. He was lying on a double bed in a room with a suspended ceiling and flocked yellow wallpaper. A sharp but painless pressure framed his face. He turned his head and saw an air conditioner in a wall beneath a picture window. The air conditioner was going full blast, whooshing and humming, but for some odd reason his face couldn't feel it.

Louis sat up slowly, swung his legs off the bed. He was still fully dressed, but not in his new suit. He was wearing bluejeans now, and a T-shirt with a big red target on the front. The clothes fit him

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snugly. He felt a bit dizzy and his head hurt like hell. He waited for the dizziness to pass, then rose gradually from the bed, using the headboard for support.

He staggered to the window and parted the yellow drapes. Outside was a small balcony with a wrought-iron rail. He was on the third floor of an L-shaped building, in the wing that extended at a right angle to the building's main entrance. Between his window and the entrance was a small parking lot. The entrance had a tattered canopy and a couple of newspaper vending machines out in front. Above the entrance, three stories of white stucco and small balconies and drawn yellow drapes. On the roof, neon letters spelled, "E - Z REST MOTEL."

On the floor beneath the window was his attaché case. He picked the case up. It felt heavier than usual. It rattled. He set it back down and it let out a ring, like a jostled telephone. He bent and tried to open it. The latches were locked. The key was in his suit, wherever that was.

He turned from the window, saw an armchair and a writing desk and a coin-operated TV. A partly open door led into a small bathroom. On the door was a full-length mirror, in the mirror his reflection.

The face in the mirror wasn't his face at all. It was a Halloween mask of flesh-colored plastic with a big, dopey grin and slits for the eyes, nose, and mouth.

Louis took a startled step backward, stumbled over the attaché case. Grabbing the drapes to check his fall, he nearly yanked them off their runners. It had to be some sort of bizarre practical joke. Someone must have dragged him sound asleep from the alley, stolen his suit and put the mask on his face. But who? His friends weren't the type. His wife was too lazy. Louis reached around to grab the mask's elastic band. He couldn't find one. Instead he found a large, tender lump.

He tried to pull the mask off. The mask wouldn't budge.

The damn thing was glued to his face.

The desk clerk sat in his little yellow alcove and grinned across the curving yellow counter at his guest, his elbow propped on a Chicago phone book that looked old enough to have Mrs. O'Leary listed. The grin kept growing on his face, and a laugh worked its way in gruff chuckles from his belly.

"It's *what?*" he finally whooped.

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"It's glued to my face," Louis said.

The desk clerk's elbow didn't like the phone book. It searched around in lazy circles, found a comfy stack of *See Chicago* brochures and settled down. "Musta been some costume party," he said. He was a barrel-chested man in a black-and-white checked shirt, the sleeves rolled up on massive forearms. The hair on his arms was curly, and almost as thick as the hair on his head. It was a large, fleshy head with little toy ears. The stubble on his face was dark as coffee grounds. "Yes siree, musta been a real roof-raiser."

On the curving yellow counter was a postcard carousel leaning like the Tower of Pisa, shedding postcards onto the blond carpet. Against a blondwood wall stood a soda-pop machine. Brass reading lamps sat on blondwood end tables. Between the end tables sat a sofa. On the sofa sat a blonde. She was lounging in pink culottes and a lavender blouse, using her tapestry shoulder bag as a pillow.

The blonde winked at Louis. Then she giggled through her nose as though she smelled something funny. Louis set his attaché case down, turned back to face the clerk. "Look, all I know is, I was sleeping in an alley last night and this morning I woke up in one of your rooms, and my suit was gone and I was wearing this T-shirt and blue jeans, and this mask was on my face . . . " He paused for breath. ". . . and I can't get it off."

"Maybe I can," said the clerk. He reached across the counter and made a grab for the mask. Louis dodged the clerk's thick fingers.

"Easy, pal. I won't hurt you," said the clerk. "Not on purpose."

"It's not coming off without taking the skin," Louis said. "Believe me, I tried. It must be some kind of super glue, like the one they advertise on TV."

The blonde rose a bit awkwardly from the sofa, slouched her way over to Louis and took his arm. Her eyes looked like pebbles in mucky ponds of eyeshadow. Her plump lower lip drooped lazily over a chin that would have looked too small on a bird. "Hi," she said. "My name's Mimi. Listen, Lou, that stuff'll wear off. Just give it a couple of weeks."

"How did you know my name?" Louis said. Before she could answer, he eased his arm from her grip and picked up his attaché case. "Oh, never mind." Pondering, he fingered the mask's plastic contours. "Maybe I could soak it off. No, wait. I'd probably drown."

"How about some nail polish remover?" suggested Mimi. She reached into her shoulder bag.

That was when Louis's attaché case started ticking.

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The clerk, whose nametag identified him as Rodney, eyed the case. "Whatcha got in there, hot watches?"

Louis shrugged. "I don't know."

"Go on," said Mimi. "Tell him, Lou."

"Tell him what?" Louis said.

Mimi faced Rodney, her droopy lip forming a well-cushioned grin. "There's a time bomb in that case."

"There is?" Louis gulped.

"Cut the act, Lou." Mimi gave Rodney a glare, curled her lip. "Get on that phone and call the guests down here. Tell 'em to bring all their valuables. Tell 'em there's a bomb and if they get outa line, Lou and I are gonna blow the stucco off this dump."

Rodney started to chuckle, and ended up coughing into his fist. His eyes edged over to the attaché case, then blinked their way slowly back to Mimi. Finally they settled on the telephone.

He picked it up and phoned the guests. All three of them.

"Good boy, Rodney." Mimi checked her watch. "I hope they move fast. We've only got nine minutes."

Louis had bent and was easing the attaché case to the floor.

"Don't put it down!" Mimi cried. "It's triggered to blow when the handle's released. You're acting like an ass, Lou. Get with the program."

Louis straightened cautiously. His hand had cramped gripping the case's padded handle. Behind the mask, sweat streamed down his face in the hollows where there wasn't any glue.

Mimi cracked her gum loud enough to jar her teeth loose. The noise made Rodney flinch. "If it blows you go with it," he pointed out nervously.

"Lou and I don't care anymore. We're tired of being poor. Aren't we, Lou?"

"Listen, lady—" said Louis.

Mimi cut him off. "If I were you, Rodney, I'd open that cash register."

"Yeah. Right. Sure, Mimi. Okay . . ." Rodney punched a button and the computerized register's drawer shot open. With trembling hands he gathered the bills, passed them over the counter into Mimi's open shoulder bag.

The guests began arriving in the lobby. There was a fat middle-aged man whose suit looked as though he had slept in it. He handed over his fat brown wallet as though he were Santa Claus and Mimi an orphan. Next came a young woman with raven pigtails, glasses

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shaped like TV screens, and about half a ton of photographic equipment slung over her denim-clad shoulder. The young woman nearly strangled herself handing over her cameras. She was followed by a stocky young man in pajamas and bowling shoes. His prized bowling ball wouldn't fit in Mimi's shoulder bag, so she settled for a hundred bucks from his cheap money clip.

When the guests had hastily departed through the lobby exit, Rodney said, "Okay, dammit, turn that thing off."

Mimi checked her watch again. "Relax. We still got three whole minutes. I'll turn it off when Lou and I are safely upstairs in my room."

"In your room?" sputtered Rodney. "What the hell kinda hideout is that?"

"The perfect kind," grinned Mimi. "If the cops come, we set the bomb off. Be sure and tell 'em that when you call 'em. Okay?"

Louis could barely breathe behind the mask. In another few minutes it wouldn't matter, though. In another few minutes he'd be blown to kingdom come. "Would somebody listen? I—"

"Come along, Lou. And remember, don't set the case down." Mimi spun on her heels, marched from the lobby. Louis, on shaky legs, followed her down the corridor to the rear stairway.

She took him to the room he'd woken up in. She led him inside and locked the door. A skeletal young man was seated stiffly in the armchair. He was totally bald, his lean face pitted and shockingly pale. On his long, pointed nose sat a pair of wire-rim sunglasses. He was wearing a suit several sizes too large. It was Louis's suit.

The skeletal man's smile was as charming as a surgical incision. Without rising from the chair, he offered Louis his hand. It was a bony hand covered with little red bumps that looked like chicken pox. Louis declined to accept it.

"Lou," Mimi said. "This is Axel, my boyfriend."

The skeletal man, still smiling, said, "I trust you have recovered from that bump on the head. I apologize for that, but I feared you might wake up and foil our plan."

"So you're the one who dragged me in here," snarled Louis. "How the hell'd you get me past the night clerk?"

Axel breathed a laugh. *"I'm* the night clerk, you fool."

"Isn't he clever?" Mimi said.

The attaché case was still ticking. "Look," said Louis. "Whatever's going on here, there's a bomb in this case, and I really—"

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"No there isn't." Axel smiled. He licked his thin lips. "Really. It was just a ruse to frighten Rodney and the guests." He fished the case's key from a pocket, tossed the key onto the bed. "Go ahead, open it."

"I'll open it," said Mimi. She grabbed the case from Louis, plopped it onto the bed. "He's too chicken. That reminds me, honey, how's your chicken pox?"

"Unbearable," said Axel.

"Don't scratch it." Mimi sprang the latches on the attaché case, opened the lid. "See, Lou? No bomb."

Louis peered cautiously over Mimi's left shoulder. There was nothing in the case except a cheap alarm clock. From her loot-laden shoulder bag, Mimi dug out a device and the alarm clock stopped ticking.

Axel crossed his legs, folded his rash-covered hands on one knee. "A device of my own design," he said, a slight trace of boastfulness in his tone.

"Axel's an electronic genius," said Mimi. She closed the attaché case and sat on the bed.

Louis sighed. "What the hell is going on here?" The hollows of the mask had filled with sweat. He longed to blow his nose, but the nostril slits were too small. "I mean, first I get knocked on the head while I'm asleep, then I get dragged into this dump and someone glues this stupid mask to my face—"

"All our doing," Axel admitted. "Mimi and I, that is. Yes, you see—" The skeletal man broke off, clenched his fists. "Good God, I am itching to death. Mimi, I must scratch. I *must.*"

"It'll just make it worse," Mimi scolded.

"Yes . . . Well . . ." Axel loosened his fists and gripped the leatherette armrests. "Where was I? Ah yes. You see, our good friend Rodney, having fled our phony bomb, will no doubt call the police. He will tell them to look for a man in a T-shirt with a red target on the front. A man in a mask, a mask that cannot be removed. In short, they'll be looking for you, my dear Louis. Meanwhile, Mimi and I will take the goodies and run. We will leave you just enough loot to make this little masquerade look convincing. . . ." Axel glanced at Mimi. "Darling, leave him a couple of hundred . . ." He flicked a bumpy red hand at her. ". . . and one of those cameras, the cheap one."

Mimi counted ten twenties from her shoulder bag, folded them and set them on the bed with the camera. Then she bounced off the

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bed, parted the drapes and peeked out. "Axel, we better get going," she said.

"This is nuts," said Louis.

Axel rose, frowning. "It is reality, sir." He patted Mimi's shoulder bag. "The money isn't much, but it will get me out of town."

"After he blows up the police station," said Mimi.

Axel shrugged. "A political statement."

"Axel's an anarchist," Mimi explained. She yanked the drapes apart, slid the window open. "We gotta get going, Lou. Nice to have met you."

"Yes, thank you so much for your help," said Axel. "And now I must escape with my beloved through the window."

"You're three floors up," said Louis, edging toward the attaché case on the bed.

"That is true," nodded Axel. "Thank goodness for the balcony rails. Damn these chicken pox, though. I hope I do not scratch myself and lose my grip."

Axel waved goodbye and turned crisply toward the window. Mimi had already climbed partway out. Louis reached the bed, grabbed the attaché case and swung it with both hands at Axel.

"Scratch this!" Louis cried. The case hit Axel on the back of the head. The skinny man collapsed like a wired skeleton that had slipped off its rack in an anatomy class.

Louis grabbed Mimi's left leg and pulled her, whining, back in through the window. She tried backing away and stumbled over Axel. Louis caught her before she could fall, sat her down heavily in the leatherette armchair.

"I knew it," whined Mimi. "I knew it wouldn't work. It was Axel's idea. He's not all there, Lou."

Louis shook his head sadly. He was feeling a bit sorry for the girl. "Did it ever occur to you that Rodney would give the cops your description too?"

"Well, Axel and me had it figured— Well . . . No."

"Some boyfriend."

"He tries."

From not too far off, they could hear sirens now. Louis grabbed the shoulder bag off Mimi's arm. "Come on, let's get out of here."

He led her from the room. "Got a car?" he said.

"In the alley."

As they raced down the stairs, Louis wheezed and panted. His heart was thudding harder than his footfalls. The sirens wailed like demons now, piercing the building's stucco walls.

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"I hope this joint has a back door," he said.

Mimi led him to it.

In Mimi's Datsun, as she drove them away from the direction of the sirens, Louis self-consciously fingered the mask.

"Don't worry. I told you, it'll wear off," said Mimi. "We got more important things to think about now. Like for instance, where the hell are we going?"

"As far as the money in this shoulder bag will take us."

"It was going to take Axel to Milwaukee."

"Suits me."

"Um . . . Lou, I just remembered something."

"What?"

"Well, I don't really know how to say this. . . ."

"Say what?"

"Well . . . promise you won't get mad?"

"Just say it."

"Okay." Mimi sighed. "There's a bomb in this car."

"Oh come on. Not again."

"No, really. It's Axel's. I told you he was planning to blow up the police station. He'd be there by now if you hadn't zonked him."

Louis swallowed his panic. It burned going down. "When's it set to go off?"

Mimi glanced at her watch. "Um . . . now."

"Stop the car."

"Okay."

She pulled to the curb and Louis scrambled out.

The shoulder bag . . . It was still in the car.

Instantly he spun around back toward the door. Mimi moved faster though, darting sideways across the front seat and slamming the door in his face.

"So long, sucker!" Laughing and cracking her gum, she peeled out from the curb.

For a moment, Louis just stood on the sidewalk, watched the little Datsun speed off down the street. Then he sighed, searched his pockets, found a tarnished old quarter.

He shuffled toward the corner, past a crooked row of brick and limestone buildings with gables and bay windows and dying little shops on their ground floors. The cars along the curb wore blisters of sunlight. The sun burned his scalp through his thick hair. The mask felt as though it had melted to his face. Passersby on the littered street made exaggerated detours around him.

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He bought a paper from the corner vendor, sat himself on a curbside bench and, squinting in the sunlight, started paging through the want ads.

A few moments later he was joined on the bench by a scrawny young man in a baggy suit. At first, Louis ignored the young man. But the suit, from the corner of his eye, looked familiar. . . .

The scrawny man rubbed his bald head and winced. "A bump for a bump," Axel said. "Yes?"

"Where the hell did you come from?" Louis cried. "That motel must be full of cops by now."

Axel smiled. "I'm a master escape artist."

"Yeah? Escape from this bench. I'm busy."

"I'd rather sit and chat."

"About what?"

"Well, why don't we start with that mask on your face."

"What about it?" barked Louis.

"It's a bomb. It's made of plastic explosive."

"Yeah, sure," Louis sneered.

"No, really. Mimi told you I was planning on blowing up the police station. I was simply going to wait till they caught you, then . . . well . . . kaboom, as they say."

"You're crazy. So's your girlfriend. I'm sick of you. Get lost."

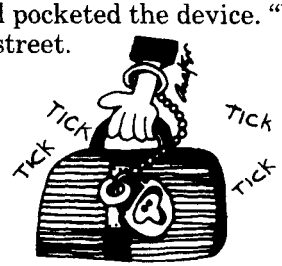
"Very well," Axel said. He rose stiffly from the bench, as though his bones were coat hangers. "I hope for your sake you elude the police. At least till the glue on that mask wears off." Axel pulled the remote-control device from a pocket of his baggy pants. He made a minor adjustment with one of the knobs. "You were kind enough to leave this in the room."

"Go ahead," said Louis. "Push the button. Nothing's going to happen. Besides, if I'm caught, you're the last one I'll phone."

"I have eyes everywhere," Axel said.

"You're bluffing."

"We shall see." Axel pocketed the device. "We shall see. Yes?" He strolled off down the street.



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a *NEW* short story by

TERRY MULLINS

In the early fourteenth century, the Christian church began a fierce ban on the pagan practices from which witchcraft derived that was to last three centuries. One outcome of the severe line taken by the ecclesiastical authorities, some say, was that belief in witchcraft spread. Certainly by the time of Mr. Mullins's story, most Europeans "had been brought up with a lively fear of the black art." And under the guise of this art, many a wicked man might manipulate his terrified neighbors . . .

WITCH HUNT

by TERRY MULLINS

The witches' terror fell upon Liege with a suddenness that left the citizens—all but a few—shuddering helplessly. A warm summer passed and the crops were good. Levo the innkeeper got three large casks of beer from Germany and Julien Feys the head weaver sent goods south. Then, just when everything was serene, the witches came.

Alain Schram was among the last to hear of their presence. A handsome young merchant, he had no wife to give him news. Sir John Mandeville, the world traveler who was recuperating in Liege, was perhaps the last person in all of Flanders to learn of the witches. People in Liege listened to him, for he had much wisdom and even greater knowledge; but they seldom had opportunity to tell him much. Had these two received word of the presence of witches earlier, much terror might have been averted.

A murky spring outside the city was called the Spring of Beelzebub. It was on land owned by the Bishop of Liege, but no amount

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of ecclesiastical activity could cleanse it of its reputation. An earlier bishop had built a small shrine in a grove of trees surrounding the spring. The shrine, never popular with the people, became a gathering place for robbers. When the bishop, with the help of soldiers of the local nobility, acted to clear the robbers out, he destroyed the trees which concealed them. What he found when he came upon the shrine was never openly told, but he had the shrine burned and its ashes cast into the spring.

That spring, then, was where the coven of witches gathered in the year of our Lord 1352.

Farmers told about it on Saturday when they came into town for market. They told of weird sounds and strange lights and of owls flying through the air the night before. On Sunday a priest heard of it and led some of his bolder parishioners to the spring. They found the destroyed grove grown up into a thick and rambling copse. There was no sign of the burned shrine. But there were other things.

Sir John Mandeville lived at the inn, so he was usually among the first customers at its tavern after dusk. On a cool September evening, Tuesday the third of the month, he was especially convivial. People crowded in, seeking light and warmth and companionship. As on many recent occasions, they looked to the one man in the city who would know how to deal with arcane events.

Mandeville received them gladly. He told them of the race of Cyclops, huge men with one eye in the middle of their foreheads, of others who had no heads at all but had eyes in their shoulders, of the damsel changed into the likeness of a dragon—all scary tales from distant lands. But of the horror at home, no one spoke.

Then Alain entered. Hankin Levo, the innkeeper, greeted Alain with enthusiasm. Patrons of the tavern were even more obsequious. After all, Alain was an *echevin,* a member of the municipal governing council, and a man of undetermined but considerable wealth.

Only Mandeville failed to show pleasure at his entry. The old man was in the middle of one of his yarns and hated distractions. He paused, waved Alain to an empty chair at his table, and resumed his narrative. "It has been told, though I myself have not seen them, that there are Pygmies only a cubit tall who marry and beget children when they are only three years old and who grow old when they are five. They are nourished solely by the aroma of apples. . . ."

The traveler's story continued but Alain's thoughts were on Louise de Broux.

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He had seen her only once, last May. He had found her, a beautiful child of fourteen, screaming in terror as a large rat alternately lunged at her and then retreated when she kicked at it and flapped her skirts. The rat had her cornered and was attacking out of simple meanness.

Alain didn't bother to scare it away. He drew a dagger and hurled it at the beast, killing it at once. The girl calmed immediately. She smiled at him and laughed, a wonderful smile and a happy laugh. "You must be Alain the rat killer," she said.

He admitted that he was.

"How lucky for me it was you who came by."

"And how lucky for me," he replied.

The unconscious gallantry brought about a subtle change in the girl. Her hands, which had been clutching her skirt, let it drop and smoothed it out. Her smile softened from delight to pleasure and her eyes spoke messages which no daughter of the nobility would ever put into words to a commoner, even a wealthy *echevin*.

Laughter in the tavern brought Alain back to the present.

Mandeville had finished his story and was looking at him with mock disgust. "You don't have to laugh at my stories," he said, "but at least you might listen. Where was your mind? You have been staring at that glass of wine for ten minutes. Wine is meant for drinking, not for crystal gazing, though there is a certain Spanish wine that can conjure up five friendly familiar spirits if one gazes intently enough and says the right charm."

"I wasn't crystal gazing. I was thinking of a rat I killed last summer."

"It must have been some rat. What made it different from the hundreds you kill every week?"

"Not hundreds. The people exaggerate. Still, hardly a day goes by that I don't kill at least one. I hate the creatures."

The last was said with such passion that Mandeville couldn't ignore it. "Some special reason?"

"When I was a child," Alain began, then moved his hand across his eyes to dismiss the subject. "Let's not talk about rats. I hate them. How's your gout?"

Mandeville smiled and drained the last of his wine. "The gout is much better," he said. "The climate of Liege suits my old bones."

Mandeville's beard of three colors began to bristle. Alain knew this to be a sign of curiosity. The man who had traveled all over

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the world never lost his inquisitiveness. "When will Freddy Pluys return?" he asked.

"Not until November. We are delivering tapestries to Genoa for Julien Feys. Freddy is to come back with olive oil. Why?"

"I asked Freddy to make notes for me on the increase of rats in Paris, Naples, and other places. I'm puzzled at the increase. I'd like to know where it is greatest and why. Your mention of killing a rat reminded me.

"That brings up another matter. Those daggers of yours, they are especially made for throwing, aren't they?"

"Yes. I can generally kill a rat with any dagger or knife, but I never miss with these."

"And I bet I could name the man who made them for you. He lives in Milan, doesn't he?"

"He does. I met him in my youth. Freddy and I delivered him enough Flemish wine to make the whole city drunk. He saw me throw at a rat in his kitchen. I pinned its back leg to the floor. He said I could do better with a well-balanced dagger and he made me one. I've had him make me a half dozen more since. He's a craftsman."

Mandeville concurred and added, "He made my sword."

It was perhaps well for Alain that his mind was absorbed with pleasant thoughts of Louise when he called on Eugene Latteur. He had scarcely entered the house when Eugene's young wife Denise burst into the room and said, "Alain Schram! I knew I heard your voice!" She turned to her husband. "He is just the man to kill that rat in our pantry."

Eugene, thirty and more years older than his wife, responded slowly but with increasing agreement. "It's a wily rodent," he said, "only moderate in size but with teeth that cut their way through two inches of wood in half an hour. We chased him away from the flour box a dozen times, but while we were at dinner yesterday he gnawed through and had a dinner for himself."

They rose and headed for the back door, Denise chattering spiritedly and leading the way, Eugene following slowly. The pantry was a small shed behind the house. It was windowless, so Denise threw the door wide open to let in as much as possible of the orange light reflected from clouds overhead.

Alain walked to the entrance and peered in, giving his eyes time to become accustomed to the dimness. Denise pressed close behind,

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leaning against him and pointing to the right. "That hole is where he gets in," she said, "and the chest farther on is where he does his thieving."

The chest had been repaired, but even as he watched, Alain could hear the splintering of wood. "He's at it now," he said. He drew and balanced his dagger.

Two steps freed him from Denise's body. A third step and the rat scooted from behind the chest and made for the hole. It got not quite halfway there before Alain's dagger struck it.

"He killed it!" Denise shouted, moving in and blocking out most of the fading light.

Alain picked up the rat, removed and cleaned his dagger, and offered the dead rat to Denise. She quickly moved out of his way and called to her husband, who stood watching from the back doorway of the house.

Husband and wife congratulated Alain and they went in to celebrate.

Denise went into the kitchen, made sure the servants were proceeding properly with the dinner, and then ran upstairs. She came down with her three-year-old son and the duenna who had been with the Latteurs as long as Alain could remember. While Alain and Eugene talked, the child walked over to his father and climbed up on one leg. Eugene bounced him with a measured and steady beat. "We're worried," Eugene said. "Witches have been covening by the spring on Friday nights. First they killed chickens, then pigs. Last Friday night it was a goat. They'll kill a child soon. Friday after next is the thirteenth. They'll steal a child before then and sacrifice it. We're worried."

Thus Alain learned about the witches.

The women sat with several items of Eugene's clothing piled before them. As the men talked, the women searched the coats and breeches for tears and holes. On finding any, they proceeded to mend them. From time to time they would find dead fleas in the garments. These they would carefully shake into a large basin placed between them for that purpose. It was a cozy domestic scene. The men should have been talking about weather, crops, and business. Instead they grappled with dark fears and ominous forebodings.

"Why doesn't the bailie take some men up to the spring on a Friday night and seize the witches?" Alain asked.

"The bailie? You wouldn't find Pierre going near that spring with an army. And he couldn't raise an army in Liege to fight witches. I

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wouldn't go and I guess I'm as brave as any man hereabouts."

"I've seen a few witches burned in Italy. They were poor old women. They babbled and people said they were talking in Satan's tongue. I don't know. Most of them just seemed to be short on wits. Before they died some of them were grinning and waving to the crowds. They seemed to enjoy the attention they were getting. I doubt that anyone had paid any attention to them in a long time. Frankly, they seemed to be harmless."

"That's in the light of day. At night they change shape and Satan gives them power to fly through the air and enter locked rooms and steal children or bewitch healthy people so they die."

"There is one more Friday night before the thirteenth. This Friday let's go to the Spring of Beelzebub and watch for them. If there's a coven of witches meeting there, we'll grab them and bring them to the bishop for trial."

Eugene was astounded. "You'd never do that," he said. "They anoint themselves with magical potions so they can become invisible at will. Or they could change themselves into a cat or an owl. Anyway, you'll never get me or any of the other citizens of Liege to go with you to a coven on a Friday night. Satan himself might be there!"

Alain looked at the women. The duenna had stopped sewing and was staring at him as if he had suggested going to hell and fighting with the demons. Denise continued sewing, her eyes intent on her work, but her usually cheerful face was ashen. The young child had left its father's knee and gone to clutch its mother's skirts.

Alain turned back to Eugene, but at that moment a servant entered. Supper was ready. Plans for putting an end to the witch scare would have to be postponed. And then it would be to Mandeville that he talked.

They settled at table as two servants brought in the first course: Flemish wine and veal pasties, black puddings and sausages.

Once the subject of witchcraft is brought up, it does not die easily. Eugene might shy away from discussing plans for going after witches, but he was willing to elaborate on the danger witches posed to the community.

"We want to protect our son," he said, "but how do you guard against a force of evil which cannot be kept out by locks or frightened away by dogs?"

Alain temporized. Like most of the rest of the world, he had been brought up with a lively fear of those who practiced the black art.

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But as a merchant he dealt with men on all levels and he observed that the best educated held witches in contempt. Sir John Mandeville in particular felt pity rather than fear for them.

"What precautions have you taken?" he asked.

"The only one I know," Eugene replied. "I keep arrows smeared with hog's blood and hellebore within easy reach. It's the only thing that can kill a witch. If I see one, she's dead. But their power to become invisible is what defeats me."

"You seem to have done all you can do. You have a crucifix above the boy's bed?"

"Naturally."

At this point the second course arrived: hares in civey, pea soup, salt meat, and a soringue of eels.

When conversation resumed, it centered on the harm witches do. To Alain's relief, it moved away from the killing of children at witches' Sabbat and dealt with their charms and spells.

"The floods which devastated this country in my youth were generally considered the work of witches," Eugene said. "And once a young woman was accused by the priest of St. Denis of trying to take holy bread away from the Mass to desecrate it. The weavers' guild rose to her defense since her husband was one of their leading members. The bishop was won over and the woman was not harmed."

Alain told of stories he had heard in Avignon of women going to witches for spells which would cause their husbands to be faithful. Such spells appeared to have made witches fairly popular in that city.

The third course was served: a roast of partridges and capons; luce, carp, and pottage.

"You could never catch a witch," Eugene said. "A witch will carry a quarterstaff to beat off pursuers. They use it to help them leap over walls and other obstacles. If you pursue them closely, they put the staff between their legs and fly off to their meeting place."

Alain didn't disagree. He had heard such arguments all his life, but he had never met anyone who had seen such things happen.

Eugene brooded. "You'll never catch them, but if I see one, I'll put a smeared arrow through its ribs."

The fourth course brightened him a bit. He looked at the fish à la dondine, the savory rice, and the bourrey in hot sauce and smiled. "I'll protect my son against Satan himself," he said.

"Who first reported the witches?" Alain asked.

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"Some peasants in one of the count's villages. Since the lights and such were on cathedral land, they brought the word with them into town instead of telling Count de Broux."

"And, of course, the count wouldn't lead his knights onto the bishop's land even if he was willing to go after the witches."

"That's it. The church or the town must deal with the coven. And you won't find anyone willing to take on the task."

With the fifth course—lark pasties, rissoles, larded milk, and sugared flawns—Eugene broke off talking about witches and began to recount events connected with the rat in the flour box. Here for the first time the women joined in the talk. Denise told of its first appearance and her futile attempts to get the dogs after it. Eugene marveled at its ability to gnaw its way into the pantry. He told of blocking the rat hole, of nailing boards over it, and of hurling a pitchfork at it. "I feared we'd never be rid of it, but rat killer here got it the first time."

Denise took up the narrative, telling it in detail for the benefit of the duenna and boy, neither of whom had witnessed any part of the affair. Eugene's son demanded to see the rat and was promised that after dinner he might.

He squealed with joy as the final course—pears and comfits, medlars and peeled nuts, hippocras and wafers—arrived.

When the meal was over they went out to show him the rat. "It isn't very large," he observed.

"No," said Eugene, "and that made him all the harder to kill. He was quick and wily."

As Alain was leaving, Eugene clapped him on the shoulder and said, "I'm glad you came by today."

Denise hugged him and kissed his cheek, saying, "Come more often."

He promised them he would and left determined to do something about the witches. It was not right that good people like the Latteurs should worry about the safety of their son.

It was partly youthful impatience, partly a feeling that if he delayed acting immediately, something awful might happen that he could have prevented, and partly a knowledge that if he let Mandeville get going on his tavern yarns, serious conversation might be impossible. For a combination of reasons, therefore, Alain set out to find Mandeville early the next morning.

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Shortly after noon he found him at the house occupied by the notary, Jean d'Outremeuse. Mandeville was helping the latter fashion a chronicle of the life of Ogier de Danois. They had reached that point in collaboration where any interruption is welcomed, so Alain was greeted warmly.

His story about the witches produced two different results. Mandeville shared Alain's view that they must take action. His friend shrank from the idea. "Only a great hero like Ogier could battle witches," he said. "And even he would not attempt to do so unless they had worked great devastation. Let us instead go down to the Church of the Holy Cross and pray to be rescued from this evil."

The notary dumped a lap full of verses into a chest and prepared to leave. Alain and Mandeville followed him, discussing plans for deeds of a more mundane sort.

An hour later Alain and Mandeville were alone in the latter's room. "You've seen a few witches," Mandeville said, "and I've seen more—mostly when they were being burned, of course. For the greater part they are old women without money or charm, completely powerless but willing to give anything, even their souls, for ability to control someone or something. Some are very young girls who cannot wait for life to bring them its fruits. All are easy victims of false promises made by others or imagined by themselves. It is ridiculous that people like Jean should tremble before them."

"He is not the only one. How many men in Liege do you think will join us?"

"You have a point. And we ought not tell the whole city we plan to go after the coven. Do you think we could do it by ourselves?"

"I'm willing to try."

"Good. We'll see if we can get help from a few discreet people, then Friday we go witch hunting."

With the decision made, reaction set in. It was all very well for Mandeville to picture witches as pitiful persons seeking some way to make their dull lives more interesting. But evil did exist.

Alain had seen Grimoria, books of black magic. He had read parts of them: bizarre and confused instructions of pointless ritual, garbled names, and extravagant claims of demonic results. He could reject the comical pictures of horned devils, of fanged furies, of naked women with talons and serpentine hair. But he could not cast off the sinister intent of the books. Evil might express itself poorly, but it existed. And out by the Spring of Beelzebub evil had hold of

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someone. Evil, or Satan himself, took control of human beings and drove them to diabolical actions.

Alain was silent, moodily pondering such thoughts as he walked with Mandeville to see the bishop and tell him of their plans. As they entered the episcopal palace, an elderly priest met and led them to the bishop's chambers.

The bishop was delighted to see Sir John Mandeville. He was surprised to see Alain Schram and at first thought that the *echevin* had come on official business. He thawed a bit when he found that this was not so. Mandeville began to tell the bishop about the witches, only to find out that he was many weeks too late.

The bishop, a short sturdy man with a square head and a strong jaw, laughed before Mandeville had got well started. "My dear Sir John," he interrupted, "are you just finding out about that outrage? The town has been talking about little else for over a month." He pulled at his long beaklike nose with stubby fingers. Then he pounded a powerful fist into the palm of his other hand. Black hairs on the back of his fingers shook like antennae. "I have been preaching against those witches every Sunday. I won't have witches in Liege!"

"I'm glad to hear that," Mandeville replied. "Alain and I want to break up this little game, but since they are your witches . . ."

"They are not my witches!"

"Well, they are on your property. They meet out where the little shrine used to be. We thought we ought to get your permission to go after them, and perhaps your help."

"Permission? You have not only my permission but my injunction to get them. Bring them to me and we'll put an end to this deviltry. Alas, I have no knights and I cannot personally accompany you, but you have my blessing."

His object attained, Mandeville relaxed and began sparring with the bishop. "Why didn't you get the count to take his knights out there and drive the witches away?"

The bishop, always on better terms with the nobility than the town government, looked at Alain and hesitated before replying. Finally his outrage overcame his caution. "The Count told me he wouldn't waste his knights on witches. His knights will fight humans and the Church must fight spiritual dangers. Since I have no knights of my own, I must listen to stories of animals being dismembered and parts of their bodies left at the gates of the city, at crossroads, even on the steps of St. Denis."

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He looked at Alain and added, "I even spoke to the town and got the same answer I did from the count. So much for democracy."

Alain, as an *echevin,* could understand the town's reply. Under Charlemagne the counties had been jointly governed by a bishop and a count. But Liege had received a charter from the king and was governed by merchants. The Church had long ago come to terms with this arrangement, but few bishops liked it. Still, he refused to be drawn into the argument.

Mandeville had no such qualms. He almost purred, "But didn't Aquinas say that the state is a kind of pact between the king and the people?"

The bishop snorted. "In *De Regimine Principii* Thomas declared that monarchy is the best government. The body has one head, not many."

When Mandeville replied with a quotation from the *Summa Theologica* Alain's attention wandered. He wondered that Mandeville could deal with so many men, all on their own level. He himself had profited from Mandeville's knowledge of trade, from how and where to get the best wool from England to where and how to find buyers in Italy. The only statement Alain knew from Aquinas, he had learned from Mandeville: Man does not sin in using moderate gains acquired in trade for the support of his household. Since he had a broad understanding of what was meant by support of his household, Alain felt no guilt as his wealth increased.

This was, to Alain's surprise, one time when Mandeville was not disposed to debate at length. He had got the permission he wanted. Now he thanked the bishop and took Alain back into the dark, narrow streets of Liege to seek a few brave men to help them attack the coven.

Three hours later they had found no recruits. Everyone wanted the witches caught. No one wanted to catch them.

"There is no help in the town," Mandeville said, "so let us turn to the castle."

Alain was glad to do so.

As they left the city wall behind them and rode toward the castle, Alain's thoughts were all on the count's daughter. He had hoped for an excuse to see her again. None had presented itself until now. He felt lightheaded. His heart palpitated in a strange manner. He felt as if life could give him no greater gift than to see and perhaps speak with Louise de Broux.

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Approaching the castle they passed two knights slowly riding their mounts around the exercise ground. They saluted them and entered. The gate leading to the lists was narrow and Mandeville preceded Alain. In this manner they crossed the drawbridge and entered the castle. In its bailey, beyond the stables and smithy, was the count's chapel. The Count de Broux, his wife, daughter, and seneschal came out of the chapel before Mandeville and Alain reached the castle's inner wall. The count hailed them. His marshal called several stable boys to tend their horses and the count invited his guests into the palace.

Alain, however, was claimed by Louise. The rat killer must help them, she said. Rats were threatening their stores of grain. She had her way, as she apparently usually did.

So, while Mandeville and the count went into the palace to talk, Alain, led by Louise and accompanied by the countess, the seneschal, the marshal, and several servants, set out to protect the castle food supply.

Across the bailey from the chapel was their bakehouse. This, Louise said, was the area infested by rats. The seneschal, a grizzled knight in his fifties, ordered the door thrown open. Two servants obeyed him and they all saw three rats scurrying about inside.

The marshal, oblivious to everyone around him, grabbed a club and charged in after the rats. With him rushing about in the bakehouse, Alain could not throw at the rats. The seneschal called to the marshal to get out of the way, but the marshal, a little man who scampered about like a dog chasing a rabbit in an open field, ignored the words. He seemed to be a person who could keep only one thing on his mind at a time, and killing rats was his fixed idea.

The seneschal laughed. "Georges Delfose is a wild man," he said. "He'll kill one of those pests if it takes him all day." It seemed as if it might. The man was so comical that everyone laughed. He heard the laughter and his fury increased. None of his blows came within a foot of any of the rats but the rodents were as frantic as he was. Their raucous squeals mixed with his curses and the thunder of the club pounding the earthen floor.

A fourth rat crept from somewhere to see what was going on and quickly disappeared again. The marshal was nimble, strong, indefatigable, and thoroughly inaccurate. One final two-handed blow shattered his club. The seneschal ran in and grabbed the frustrated marshal. "That's the third club you've broken in two weeks," he said, "and you've never killed a rat yet. You stay with trapping

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them. Now go outside and let Mr. Schram get at them." He half led and half dragged him out.

Alain walked into the bakehouse. Dust filled the air. The rats were quiet, but Alain could see two of them. One had been running between the oven and a large baking tray in the corner. It was by the oven now in plain sight, waiting to dodge another blow. Alain's wrist came forward and his dagger accounted for one rat.

Behind him there were cheers. A small crowd of knights, squires, peasants, and servants had gathered to watch the marshal's antics. Now they applauded the first kill. Louise was so excited that she lost all sense of being a young woman and became the girl he had first seen kicking at the rat which attacked her.

With the first sign of success, several servants volunteered to beat on the side of the bakehouse to scare rats into the open. A rousing hour and a half followed. At the end, seven rats had been killed and no more could be found.

There seemed little point to intruding on the count and Mandeville, so Alain waited out in the bailey, talking with Louise and the countess and the seneschal.

Louise showed him the stables where the knights' steeds were being groomed. Most of the stalls were empty. "There are only six knights serving the count now," the seneschal said. "Once there were half a hundred."

The smithy was equally spacious. One smith and two assistants were at work. The count's retainers formed a small community now. As the town had grown, the castle and its villages had become less important. But for Alain the castle held one thing the town could not match, Louise de Broux.

When the count and Mandeville returned, Louise changed again. Her artless chattering became witty. Her careless gestures became graceful. Her frank admiration of Alain's skill with the dagger became warm appreciation as she told her father what had been going on.

The count was gracious in his thanks. As Alain and Mandeville prepared to leave, the count ordered his seneschal to give each a purse of money. "No guest ever leaves without a gift," he said.

As they rode toward Liege, Alain noted the small farms they passed. "The count's wealth comes from these serfs, peasants, and freemen," he commented to Mandeville, "and they live in huts without windows and at most a table and chair or two within. I feel I should return the count's gift to them."

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"Which ones?"

"That is the problem. I would probably cause jealousy and stir up trouble if I tried."

"And the count would be mortally insulted. You are wealthier than he is anyway. Would you give your own money to them?"

"I see what you mean. Still, I don't feel right about it. How did your talk with the count go?"

"He and his knights want nothing to do with witches. They'll fight against the King of England or the Emperor of Germany, but they want no part of the Prince of Darkness."

"Then we'll go it alone."

That effectively ended their attempt to enlist others. Church, town, and castle had refused to aid them. In high spirits they made their plans.

That Friday was overcast. Mandeville buckled on his sword. Alain, though he wore a sword, too, strapped four daggers on at convenient places. Things you can't reach with a sword, you can with a well-aimed dagger. They set out shortly before sunset.

They reached the copse, a tangled mass of low bushes and half-grown trees. It looked dark and impenetrable. As they rode around it, however, they found several places where secret paths entered. The openings had been covered with branches in a clumsy effort to disguise them.

"There are several ways in," Alain said.

"And ways out," Mandeville added significantly. "But we can't ride our horses in. If we leave them out here, we might scare the witches away."

"And we'd find the horses killed, too."

A small stream which flowed from the spring and eventually reached the Meuse River had wild bits of green growing along its banks. From place to place there would be large clusters of bushes and an occasional very old tree. About half a mile downstream there was a large clump of ancient yews which could hide the animals. They tethered them among the yews and returned to the copse.

Entering one of the paths and covering it behind them, they worked their way toward the center. It took them no more than ten minutes to find the spring.

In a small clearing beside it they found a rude pulpit built. A human skull and a short sword lay on the ground inside the pulpit. Two feet in front of the pulpit was a pile of flat stones arranged to

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form a sort of altar. Beside the altar was a large basket.

Other than that the cleared area was bare, but there was a rustling in the rue bushes behind the pulpit. Tied there and grazing quite peacefully was a two-month-old lamb.

Mandeville looked worried. "I don't like this at all," he said. "The farmers were right. Something has been going on here and it looks as if these aren't just silly people gathering together for immoral thrills. There is organization of a sort here, someone planning and setting the scene beforehand."

"That's an ugly weapon," Alain said.

"It's an ancient short sword," Mandeville replied, "one carried by nobles into battle during the Crusades of St. Louis. It looks sharp. I could guess which noble owns it."

Alain didn't wish to hear the name, yet no power on earth could have kept him from asking, "Which?"

"Count de Broux."

Alain winced. He remembered too well Mandeville's saying that old women and very young girls were particularly susceptible to the lure of Satanism. He tried to focus his mind on the innocent beauty of Louise de Broux, but a tough strain of honesty made him admit that there was something other than innocence in the way her smile had changed, the way her whole attitude had changed when he had blurted out, "How lucky for me." There was no wantonness, he would swear, but there was nothing childlike in her eyes. Even in the present macabre circumstances, the memory of that brief encounter sent blood pounding in his ears.

Their first meeting had been brief but more intimate than his recent tour of the castle's bailey. The presence of a couple of dozen of the count's retainers had sounded a convivial but not a personal note on the latter occasion.

He looked with loathing at the short sword. It cast a pall over him.

"Not having second thoughts, are you?" Mandeville asked.

"No! This thing has got to be stopped."

There was nothing more to be found in the clearing. The setting sun cast formless shadows and the place grew dim. The stone altar took on the appearance of a coffin. The rude pulpit seemed to change shapes in the enfolding dark. One moment it was a poorly built screen thrown up to hide the sword and the skull. The next it was a monstrous cage which might hold feral creatures steeped in forbid-

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den craft of human and unhuman lore. And the next it would disappear altogether, a blank space merged with the surrounding blackness.

Mandeville motioned to some thick bushes at the edge of the clearing. "We can hide there," he said. "If we crouch down, no one will see us even if there are lights; and I'm sure there will be lights."

They beat their way into the brush, cutting down small plants which might trip them if they needed to leave their hiding place quickly. Soon they had a safe, if not altogether comfortable, blind from which to watch the clearing.

They had less than an hour to wait. They heard snappings and rustlings, then the sound of people walking over dead leaves and brittle sticks. Then they saw the flickering of small lights. The sounds and glimmers came closer.

Three naked figures entered the clearing from the side opposite the watchers. Two men and a woman approached and touched the altar. They had a single torch which they fixed in the ground at one corner. Then they lay face down in front of the altar.

A few minutes later others came by threes. When four torches had been set at the altar, there were six men and six women prostrate in the clearing. One more and the coven would be complete.

He appeared with a suddenness that surprised Alain. A man with a horned mask rose behind the pulpit and shouted in a high falsetto voice. The coven shouted reply.

All the witches wore masks, crude caps of cloth or poorly woven straw or leaves and twigs tied together covering half their faces. Mostly the effect was bizarre rather than awesome. But the leader's mask, a leather hood with eye holes and three horns, was grotesque enough to appall. Around the face it had obscene shapes which danced and dangled when he moved.

The leader, speaking as Satan himself, led the coven in a litany of blasphemy. The crowd swayed and stamped.

The men were ill-nourished specimens past middle age. Five women were ancient crones with shriveled breasts and sagging flesh which flopped loosely on their bones. The sixth was a young girl. She it was who walked up to the altar and lay down on it. The Satan figure, carrying the human skull, left his pulpit and approached the altar. He placed the skull on the young girl's navel and she held it in place. Then he disappeared into the darkness and reappeared with the lamb and a sword.

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Four men came forward, two on each side of the altar. They each took one leg of the animal and held it over the skull. The leader seized the lamb's head, pulled it back, and cut its throat. Blood gushed forth, filling the skull, and pouring out over the young girl's body. The Satan figure took the lamb and skinned it quickly and expertly. He cut its skin into thirteen parts and called the coven forward.

He took the skull from the girl and, beginning with her, made each to taste of it. Then they all took a part of the lamb's skin and rubbed the blood and grease all over their bodies. They kept up a monotonous chant.

As they were doing this, the leader cut off the left back leg of the slaughtered animal and waved it about, dancing frenetically and beating the altar with the lamb's leg. He continued in a mad passion even after the coven had finished anointing themselves.

When the chanting ended, he signaled for two men to hold the girl. He put on a pair of heavy gauntlets and reached behind the pulpit, drawing forth a huge ferocious rat. He held it up, shouting, "This is Judas and this shall be the Judas kiss." The rat bit viciously at the gauntlets as the man approached the girl.

When she realized that he meant for her to kiss the rat, the girl screamed and tried to break free, but the men tightened their grip on her arms and held her head so she couldn't move it.

Mandeville said, "The rat will bite off her nose." He seized his sword and started to rise. But Alain had moved sooner. He was already standing clear of the bushes with a dagger in each hand. The rat was still two feet from the girl when it died.

The coven was stunned. Its leader dropped the rat and vanished behind the pulpit. Others started to run. Alain, clearly visible in the torchlight, held the second dagger poised to throw. "Stand still, all of you!" he shouted.

They were transfixed with fear.

Mandeville looked behind the pulpit, but the leader was gone. He herded the others together. "Where are your clothes?" he asked. One man replied that they removed them as soon as they entered the copse.

Since they had come by two different paths, Mandeville drove one group and Alain the other back as they had come. Outside the copse they came together again, dressed and unmasked. Alain recognized the men and three old women as poor townspeople. The young girl

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was no one he had ever seen before. Two old women said they lived on farms of the count's estate.

Alain got the horses and he and Mandeville marched the coven to the town and woke the bishop.

No one in the coven knew who the leader was. They all thought he was Satan. They had never seen him without his mask.

Mandeville shook his head. "These are just miserable victims of the man who posed as Satan," he said. "Until we find him, we have not crushed the menace. He will find more dupes and start over."

"I think I can find him," Alain replied.

The next day Alain, Mandeville, and the bishop rode to the castle. The bailey was filled with knights, squires, peasants, and servants. Word of the night's events had got around.

The count himself came out with his seneschal. Mandeville and the bishop spoke with him. They motioned for Alain to take over. He moved through the crowd to the stables. There he found the marshal, whom he turned over to the bishop.

A crew of the count's servants rummaged through old equipment from days when the count's knights numbered half a hundred. Under a pile of saddles they found the gauntlets, rat-gnawed and blood-stained. Further down they discovered the mask of Satan. Since none would touch it, Alain hauled it out and gave it to the bishop.

As they carried the marshal to the cathedral for ecclesiastical trial, Mandeville asked Alain, "How could you recognize the marshal with that mask on?"

"You weren't there," Alain responded, "when he tried to kill the rats. Once you have seen him in a frenzy, you can't mistake it. The weird gyrations with the lamb's leg gave him away as if he had on no mask at all."

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a *NEW* short story by

MILTON BERLE

Milton Berle has been a vaudeville star, a movie actor, and "television's first mass attraction." (People) *But some of his fans may be surprised to learn that he is also a writer with credits in several national magazines. This is his first piece for* EQMM.

TRUCK STOP

by MILTON BERLE

He didn't look much like a trucker. Short truckers, even those only five-three or -four like him, had an attitude you could see. They wore it like a Pendleton, outside and brazen. His white cotton shirt wasn't a trucker's shirt.

Through the neon Bud sign in the window beyond the booths Jenny could see his rig. It was a big one with enough tire to gag a fast lane. Jenny guessed that he was an independent, bringing a load out on the northern route but heading back through California and Arizona. This had to be his virgin trip on the big I. Probably lucked into a load of rattan furniture or something.

Jenny'd never seen him before so she knew he was cherry. No trucker would have dared to come this way without stopping at the Countyline Cafe. A trucker could have lost his license for less of an infraction. This one had to be cherry.

Jenny thought about asking him where he was from and where he was heading, but he didn't start any kind of conversation on which Jenny could hang her curiosity. A grunt of hello and that was all. Instead of ordering, he'd pointed to what he wanted on the menu.

In thirty-two years as a waitress, Jenny'd never asked questions unless the other party indicated a willingness to take the witness stand. This one hadn't given sign one. A shame too, as it was a slow

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day. He was the only customer she'd seen for two hours. Two, three in the afternoon was often slow. Most truckers were barreling to beat the traffic that started choking roads at four.

When Jenny served the short fellow Countyline's world-famous salmon croquette special, she stood facing him from behind the counter. Habit then pulled a few statements out of her. The salmon was just about the best thing on the menu. Most of the time the catch of the day was something like fish sticks. Pablo, the new man in the kitchen, cooked a lot of things badly, but he was good with salmon. And meatloaf. By the way, did the gent want some hot sauce? She knew he'd shake his head no. Mayonnaise, she figured with a silent chuckle, would blister his tongue.

As he cut into the second croquette, the mound still firm when severed, the short trucker spoke up. "This is real nice. My wife makes them good, too."

Jenny shifted about a third of her hundred-and-eighty pounds and was about to start asking questions when three bikers came through the door. Dressed in leather, confidence, brute, and about ten gallons of unwashed, they sat down in the booth nearest the door. Jenny'd seen them before. They weren't regulars, once a month at most. They were good for two beers and a little noise. They usually kept their distance from the truckers.

One of the bikers, Wrench, started to pick up a menu with his teeth. Face, the second, who'd probably been a biker eight minutes after birth and slapping the doctor, walked over to the jukebox. As he reached into his pocket for some coins, Jenny cut him short.

"The box isn't working," Jenny said.

"That's dumb," said Face. "Feel like music." Turning, he saw the short trucker looking at him. "What are you looking at, man?"

Jenny said, "Let him be."

Face pressed on. "What in hell are you looking at?" he said to the short trucker.

"Nothing."

"You trying to say I'm nothing?"

The third biker, the real fat one named Herron, spoke up. "He said you were nothing. Face, you've been insulted."

"Cut it out," Jenny said.

"I'm not looking for trouble," the short trucker said. He turned back to his food.

"I think he is," Wrench said, giving up on the menu.

"Why are you guys acting up?" Jenny asked. "The man came in to eat."

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Face said, "We came in for a couple of brews and some music. He's the one making trouble."

"Can't live without music," said Wrench.

"Maybe he can sing for us," said Herron.

"How about a brew on the house?" Jenny asked. "And the radio?"

"Rather hear this cat sing," said Wrench.

"You do sing, don't you?" Face asked.

The short trucker dropped a five-dollar bill on the counter and pushed himself from the seat.

"I'm sorry," Jenny said.

"It's okay." The short trucker turned to go. Face placed himself between him and the door. "We'd like to hear you sing."

"You guys are nuts," Jenny said.

"Sing!" Face barked.

"A Willy Nelson tune. You know 'Whiskey River'?" Wrench added.

The short trucker tried to sidestep so he could get through the man mountain. Face moved with him and pushed at him. "Sing something," he said, almost begging.

The short trucker sang. Sixteen bars into "On the Road Again," he smiled, as if pleased to be of service. The song trailed off.

"Not bad," said Herron. "How about dancing for us?"

"Stop it," Jenny screamed.

Face motioned for her to calm down. "One little dance, ma'am. That's all we want."

The bikers started to clap out a tempo. The short trucker danced.

After watching him for a few seconds, the bikers stopped clapping. The short trucker stopped dancing.

"Dude, you are one bad dancer," said Face. He stepped aside. The short trucker exited. Sitting, he motioned for three beers.

"That was mean, guys," Jenny said. "If you want to play mean, find some other restaurant."

"We were only funnin'," said Herron.

Jenny brought the beers. A moment later, Gardner, one of the regular drivers, walked in and started for the counter. In the booth, the bikers were amusing themselves. Gardner, big enough to make the comment, said, "You three are having fun, aren't you?"

"You missed some," said Face. "We had a dude just left gave us a concert. Didn't sing bad. Couldn't dance though. He was the worst dancer I ever saw."

"He was a bad driver too," said Gardner. "When he took off, he backed clear over your three bikes. Flat, you never saw flat." ●

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A harrowing story of phantoms—and revenge . . .

A SALESMAN'S TALE

by DAVID DEAN

They're back. The woman and the girl. I keep pretending I haven't noticed them, but I have. I certainly have.

They don't seem to be looking for me, though I must be the reason they've returned. Why else do the dead come back but to haunt their killers?

So far, they appear dazed and lethargic. They just sit very still, facing the altar, as if gathering strength. They remind me of moths that have just crawled from their cocoons, weak and quivering, not quite recognizable until they've dried and spread their wings. Maybe that's how they've gotten so close without me noticing, and more importantly, remembering. They've been taking shape and mass for so long that it's been almost imperceptible.

To think that it was only a few weeks ago that I first noticed the woman at all! Even then I didn't recognize her. She crept in unannounced.

Now, I can hardly keep my eyes off them. Each Sunday, as Barb and the kids and I enter the church, I look for them. They're never there when we arrive. I always spot them later, already sitting amongst the other parishioners, as if they'd never left the church. I never see them enter. That wouldn't be their way. This is far more unnerving. The woman knows I have to show up each Sunday. What excuse would I give Barb or the Monsignor? After all, I'm a family man. I'm not about to let the two of them disrupt my life just by occupying a pew! They tried once before and look where it got them! I admit, I'm a little curious, too.

She was always demanding . . . in more ways than one, if you know what I mean. She wanted me to be part of her, and the girl's, life. And I was . . . for a while. I was still in the sales department and spent a lot of time on the road and away from home. Naturally, I was not averse to a little feminine companionship. In fact, the city

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she lived in was one that my company did a lot of business in, so it was convenient. For both of us.

She was one of those recently divorced young mothers whose husband's whereabouts are unknown. No child support, no family, no skills, and no future. I was a godsend. She was appreciative. The girl was quiet. I never made any promises!

I did not, however, tell her that I had a wife and kids two states away. She didn't even know my real name. Each time I'd roll into town I'd make sure I tossed my wallet and wedding ring into my briefcase, which I'd leave in the car. I knew I was being eyed for promotion and I couldn't afford a scandal. I had my sights on the main office.

I always made a point of showing up after dark and leaving before light. The neighbors never really saw me or my car. It was a different company car each week, in any case.

Everything was just fine. I liked the woman. The woman was crazy about me. The little girl was a problem. She was too quiet. She reminded me of her father, whom I never met. I seemed to find her around every corner. Never smiling, never speaking. She watched me a lot. I knew she didn't like me. I even mentioned it to her mother a few times. She would always find a way to take my mind off the girl though, at least for a while. I took to thumping her when her mother wasn't around. Not hard, just enough to make her stay clear. I knew the woman would find out, but what could she do?

Then I got the promotion. I would not be returning to that town on any regular basis. I decided to tell them. Why? I'm not sure. If I had just walked out, like any other time, and not come back, that would have been the end of it. They could never have traced me. They didn't even know my name. The woman believed I worked for my company's biggest rival! That was one of my little jokes.

Maybe I wanted to see how much I meant to the woman. A few tears shed on my behalf seemed appropriate. I also wanted a shot at the little girl. I had decided to make her the reason for my leaving. Something for her mother to mull over in my absence. It would have made for a neat wrap-up except for one thing. My timing was bad.

Instead of waiting till the next morning, when I was preparing to leave, to break the news, I told them the night before. I had looked forward to an evening of tearful pleas and enticing promises and that's exactly what I got. I fell asleep, with a good meal in my belly, to the pleasing sounds of the woman lashing out at the daughter.

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When I woke the next morning I found mother and daughter waiting for me at the kitchen table. They had my briefcase open and my driver's license and company cards spread out before them. They sat side by side and looked at me. They had closed ranks. I knew this was the girl's doing. She had been suspicious of me all along and after last night had decided to do something about it.

They both sat there without saying a word. They looked pale and dark around the eyes. They looked as if they had sat there all night waiting for me. Just like they do in church now. They never looked more like mother and daughter. I was afraid. They had power over me.

Looking into their eyes, I only took a moment to decide. Along with my papers and ID, they had brought in my samples. My samples are surgical instruments and a neatly wrapped package of them lay right inside the briefcase. I reached in, unwrapped them, and went to work.

That was many long years ago and I haven't given it much thought since. They were dead. Now they're back. But they're weak. Just like before. Laughably weak. I'm not easily frightened.

The woman and child are sitting four rows directly in front of my family and me when suddenly the priest raises his voice and points at them. I don't know what he's saying as I'm a little distracted, understandably. I glance up just in time to see him single them out as if they're an example or proof of his sermon. A number of people in the congregation turn to look at them. I'm not sure, but I think one or two glance in my direction also.

As if animated by the priest's gesture, the woman begins to slowly, almost mechanically turn her head to the left. I know instantly that she is scanning the church for me. The effort seems to cost her dearly. Her skin is pale and has a sickly, feverish glow. Her head stops turning just short of looking over her shoulder. She gazes for a few moments into the pews on her left. Then, without turning her head or body any further, her eyes, or should I say eye, as I can only see the one, begins to shift further yet to the left. It reminds me of an animal that is too sick or wounded to move, trying to see its executioner walking up behind it. The eye travels with painstaking slowness to the outer corner of the socket and stops, straining. On her full lips is just the slightest smile. I shift a few inches to my right, nudging Austin over. He kicks me. At this moment I'm glad to be behind her.

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She holds that pose for just a few moments longer and then turns slowly forward. She didn't see me but she knows I'm here. The girl never moves. She's like a large doll propped up front as a good example to other children.

I've decided against taking communion today. The idea of walking into her field of vision makes my palms sweat. Not that I'm afraid, but she may call out something. They are gathering strength.

It's next Sunday already, and here we are back at Mass again. All of us. I didn't really want to come. Not because of them, they can't hurt me, I know that, but because I haven't been sleeping well. It's not unusual for a man who carries a lot of responsibility.

Barbara nudges me to stand for prayer, as I've been daydreaming. I notice as I do that the woman and girl are standing also. I hadn't seen them do that before now. They usually remain seated. I also notice they're only three rows in front of us now. They've crept up!

As I watch, the little girl snakes her spindly arm around the woman's waist. The arm seems grubby or bruised. I imagine my fingerprints etched in purple on her pale flesh. The woman raises her head, squares her shoulders and begins slowly to turn in my direction. I cannot look away.

Her face is vacant and unanimated as her gaze sweeps across the worshipers. When she reaches about three-quarters profile, she stops. I realize that I'm holding my breath. With what I imagine as an almost audible click the head swivels an inch more to the right and stops again. I am in her line of vision. She sees me.

The eyes quicken and focus. They are large and almond-shaped, the blue so brilliant that they seem lit from within. The skin is like milk, with high spots of color at the cheeks. The lips are full and moist and slightly parted. The woman's face is framed by dark, humid tendrils of hair, giving the impression that she has just risen from a warm and active bed. She looks exactly as she did the last night I saw her. I'm suddenly weak with longing. I feel tears welling up. She smiles. As if acknowledging the distress she has caused, the corners of her mouth turn up. Just the hint of a smile. A smirk, really. She's letting me know that she's not so weak anymore. I hear myself speak her name and then bite down hard on my lip, wishing I could call it back. I taste my blood, warm and salty in my mouth.

Barbara has me by the arm and is whispering something urgent in my ear. A number of people are staring at me. I turn away with an effort and begin up the aisle. I feel her eyes burning into my

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back and the only thing that keeps me from running is the weakness in my knees.

I step out into a brilliant, cold day and think of her parted lips revealing small, yellowing teeth. As I bring my handkerchief to my mouth, I picture those same teeth crushing my bones and faint.

It's Sunday morning again and I'm lying here wondering what they want and what I'm going to do. I can guess what they want. I think I know. What do all ghosts want? They want their murderer known. A sordid disclosure of his hidden past! Isn't that the way these stories go? The killer exposed like something poisonous found under a rock, pleading for forgiveness from a horrified world?

They won't find me that easily. I was always smarter than the woman; she knows that. She even told me so on occasion. I wouldn't be where I am today if I weren't. And they wouldn't be where they are if they hadn't tried to outsmart me! They must have felt pretty smug sitting there with my future spread out over their kitchen table. I wonder how smug they felt when I unwrapped my little present?

That's it, isn't it? Initiative. I must take action. It's no good lying about the house, pretending to be ill and waiting for God only knows what! Barbara knows something isn't right. We haven't had sex for a week! Since last Sunday, I just can't do it! And the children. Every time they're around I start to get weepy. I can't explain it, and they just stare at me as if I were a stranger. So I must do something . . . and I think I know what. I'm going to beat them to the punch!

Probably, in cases like this, it's the remorse and regret that eventually wear a person down and make him do something stupid. But what if that person were to rid himself of the so-called guilt by confession, and I don't mean to the authorities? They suggested the answer themselves by appearing at Mass. I'll be first in line for the confessional! The church has to forgive, and after that, what power could they have over me?

The church is almost empty upon our arrival, which is no surprise as we're nearly thirty minutes early. I've convinced Barb that I must attend confession prior to Mass. She wants to ask questions but is afraid, I think. I scan the interior quickly as we enter, just to make sure. They're not here. I would have been very surprised if they were. Everything is going as I'd hoped.

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I get Barb and the children situated in our usual spot, which is on the opposite side of the church and somewhat forward of the confessional. I genuflect, turn, and cross the aisles to the booth. I can see that there's no one ahead of me by virtue of a small light fixture attached to the side of the booth. A red light is illuminated when the confessional is in use, and a green when it is vacant and a priest is on duty within. The green lamp is on. I kneel at the nearest pew to say a quick prayer before entering, in case a priest is watching, and glance underneath the half-curtain shrouding the entrance as I do so.

In the dimly lit interior I see small, white legs ending in a scruffy pair of Mary Janes. The feet are on the floor pointing in my direction and I see, even in this dim light, that the legs are lacerated in many places, forming a crisscross pattern. The wounds are not bleeding, having dried without healing. The child on the other side of this curtain is clearly not kneeling for confession. Suddenly I'm aware of the priest at the front of the church, attending the altar. I realize now that there is no one to hear her confession. That's not why she's there. She is waiting for me to pull back that curtain and join her there in the darkness.

I stand up, swaying, and begin walking away. My legs will barely support me and I grab at several people on my way, who must think I'm drunk. I can't stop looking over my shoulder for fear that she'll come out of that box behind me. I don't want to see her face! Barb is clutching a child in each arm and staring at me white-faced as I stumble towards the door. She doesn't see the woman kneeling not ten feet from them stand and slowly begin that awful turn. I shout a warning as I rush out through the doorway.

It's Sunday again! No matter. I'm not going to Mass today. A simple solution to a complex problem. They can have the church. I'll stay right here at home. Not that it makes much difference.

Barbara took the kids and left last Sunday, right after my little episode at confession. She's frightened. Austin and Vivian, picking up on their mother's mood, just stared at me while Barb packed. That made me very uncomfortable. They ran when I tried to hold them. I was in no condition to make them stay.

Barb's suspicious, too, I think. She says I shouted out the word "murder" as I fled church last week. I know I didn't say that, I was trying to warn her of the woman. It's funny under the circumstances that she should hear that, though I can't recall what I did say.

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I haven't been in to work all this week, either. The office has phoned several times and left messages on my answering machine, but with Barb gone I just can't seem to find the energy to lie about being ill. Barb used to do that for me sometimes. In fact, I can't seem to summon up any energy at all. Perhaps they're draining me. Maybe that's how they've grown in strength. By sucking out my strength and resolve, they leave behind a vacuum that draws in all the weaker emotions, like guilt and remorse. I can almost feel them forming a lump in my chest. Something hard yet brittle. If I press down on my rib cage I can feel it crack and slide from underneath the pressure of my palm. Tears spring to my eyes, and my muscles become weak and flaccid, unable to support me. It's a sickening feeling. Mostly, I just lie here and pretend not to notice.

It's a bright, sunny day out, though it rained most of last night. The rain made me wakeful as I kept thinking that I could hear voices just beneath my bedroom window. The gurgling of water through the gutters was the cause. Still, I was expectant. Several times the sound of the rain blowing through the shrubbery put me in mind of women in long dresses strolling through the yard. Dresses that would trail across the grass as they walked, rustling slightly. It was a peculiar thought and I guess that's why I dreamt so strangely afterwards.

I must have fallen asleep close to dawn. In my dream, the sun was rising above the drenched earth. My house had that clean, windswept but slightly drowned look that it probably has this very moment. I was lying in my bed, dreaming, when there was just the slightest of sounds. The soft scrape of a tiny shoe on the walkway leading to my front door. Barely audible, yet instantly recognized.

I felt myself trying desperately to wake up, but I couldn't seem to open my eyes! Even though I was dreaming, I couldn't see! Somehow, I managed to sit up in bed and I began to force my eyelids apart with my fingers. Then I could see again.

My room was flooded with the morning sun and I could see that I was alone, but as sometimes happens with dreams, I could see outside my house as well. As if I were floating, disembodied, above my home looking down at the vacant scene. There was no one there, only an empty, concrete pathway leading to my front door, which was standing wide open!

I wanted desperately to rejoin my body, which was hidden beneath the roof now, and warn myself! There was someone in the house with me! Then, as is the nature of dreams, I was there. Sitting up

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in bed, staring at my bedroom doorway. Waiting for them to step into my vision. There was a loud bang in the hallway, followed by silence. I choked off a scream. Then the whispering began. Just outside of my line of vision. Hushed, conspiratorial tones, as if a course of action was being discussed. Finally, the conversation ended and I could hear small female laughter drifting away.

I awoke sitting up in bed, staring at my bedroom doorway. I could feel a cool, fresh breeze blowing into my room. I slept with all windows and doors closed and locked.

When I went into the hall, I could see small patches of damp leading to my room and returning to the front door, which stood open. I noticed the hall closet was also open and a shambles. An old briefcase lay on the bare floor in front of it. I recognized it. This was what had made the loud bang in my dream. It had been flung from its shelf. It would contain my samples.

I picked it up, carried it into the kitchen, and set it on the table. I didn't need to look inside. They were still there. I had never bothered to remove them. The police would never connect me with the scene and even if they did, I had thoroughly cleaned the instruments. Even so, I don't know why I've kept them. Easier than getting rid of them, I suppose.

I walked into the living room and closed the front door. Oddly enough, I didn't feel so much frightened as disappointed. I was weak, after all. They could now come and go in my life as they pleased and I was powerless to stop them. I knew what they were waiting for. My wife and children were gone, my career as good as finished. Only one thing was left and they were waiting for it. Confession. Humiliation. But I think I know something that they don't want me to.

Confession only occurs if there's guilt and conscience and they are drawing mine out and nurturing it. It's become a cancer that I can't ignore or trust, yet it's mine! That's the key! Ultimately, I can remove it. They may have underestimated me, after all.

I have a few shots to steady my nerves and take the parcel from the briefcase. Originally, I was studying to be a doctor, but financial hardships diverted me to business. Even so, I remained on the fringes and still take great pride in the instruments we manufacture. As I unwrap them, I can see they gleam as if new.

Something strikes the windowpane in the kitchen door, startling me, and I drop a surgical knife with a clatter. The door is locked and I'm not foolish enough to open it. Standing off to one side, I

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tease back the curtain and put my eye to the glass. A cardinal, bright as a splash of blood, lies broken on my rear stoop. My eyes are drawn in the direction it came from. That's what they've been waiting for.

The two of them are standing close together under a barren maple tree, facing the door. The woman's eyes are riveted on mine. The child's face remains an accusing shadow. As if on cue, the woman begins moving across the lawn toward me, her face a mask of rage, flecked with spittle. Somehow, she knows what I intend to do. I can see her mouth working grotesquely, grinding without sound. Her stride is impossibly long and she covers the distance with a nightmarish speed. I can't take my eyes from her and it's only an involuntary reaction that makes me fall back, releasing the curtain just as she reaches the door. I see her silhouette on the other side of the material. I expect her face to thrust through the glass! But the glass does not break and the door does not burst open. She remains as she is, a frozen outline on the fabric, radiating hatred. I watch, unable to move, and understand how strong they have become. By the end of the day they will not have to wait for me to sleep to enter this house. No barrier will stop them. Now is my only chance to act! Knowing this, I can turn my back on my guardian and begin to work. I reach for a scalpel.

Suicide is never a pretty sight and this one was particularly gruesome. The detective-lieutenant surveyed the carnage and grimaced. How, he asked himself, could a person open himself from sternum to pelvis? Surely there were easier, less agonizing ways to kill oneself? He would have to wait for the medical examiner's report, but he felt certain that this old boy had done some digging around while he was at it. What in the world for?

As the wrecked body was being carried out and the scene-of-crime officers began their exhaustive cataloguing, the lieutenant held a scrap of paper up to his eyes. He clasped it with a pair of tweezers and reread its contents. It should have pleased him but it didn't. On this piece of paper was both the explanation for the suicide and quite probably the solution to a ten-year-old double slaying. In other words, a confession. It must have been written by the eviscerated man, as all the doors were dead-bolted from the inside, but his experience told him that it was in a distinctly feminine hand.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

CELIA FREMLIN

For something in a lighter vein, we turn to Celia Fremlin, and a tale told tongue-in-cheek . . .

MOTHER'S CLEVER IDEA

by CELIA FREMLIN

I wonder, thought Joanna resignedly as she helped her mother-in-law out of the train, I wonder what Mother will have forgotten *this* time?

"Two suitcases, a hatbox, your umbrella—oh, and Polly's cage, I didn't know you were going to bring *her!*—is that all, Mother? Are you sure that's all?"

Both women peered anxiously in through the compartment window. Doors slammed. The train trembled towards departure.

"Well, I can't see anything . . . " began Joanna.

"No, I'm sure that's all, dear." But Mrs. Trent's rosy, childlike face framed in grey curls still looked a little worried.

"I *think* that's all— Oh!" She clapped her hand to her mouth like a schoolgirl and stared in horror at the departing train.

"There! I knew there was something!"

"Well?" said Joanna patiently.

"My dear—I just lent them to him for a moment—the little boy on the train. He was so sweet, and I was afraid Polly would bite him if he kept on playing with her, and he was getting so tired of doing nothing—*such* a long journey for a child—I know what it's like, I remember when Robert was little—he was a bit like Robert, too, the same blue eyes and way of—"

"*What* did you lend him, Mother?"

"Robert's binoculars," said Mrs. Trent in a hollow voice. "You know he always wants them at the seaside. So I looked them out

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and put them in my case straightaway so that I couldn't forget—you know what my memory is like—and now . . ."

"Well, it can't be helped," said Joanna. "I expect they'll be handed in. Robert will have to ring up. . . ."

Anyway, she reflected as she propelled Mrs. Trent and her belongings towards the station entrance, Robert can't blame *me*. It's *his* mother, and *his* binoculars, and he must have known something like this would happen if she travelled down alone. We should have brought her with us last week, of course, only it seemed such a good idea to have at least one week of the holiday on our own.

"On our own." The words made her smile wryly; and as she set down the suitcases and prepared for the long wait for a taxi, she found herself thinking once again about Corinne.

Corinne. A name that barely a week ago had meant little to her beyond a vague bundle of half-forgotten anecdotes, but which now meant a neglectful husband, a ruined holiday. It meant Robert's ex-fiancée whom he had not seen for five years—until last Sunday afternoon.

It had been a hot afternoon, the second of their holiday. Joanna was wrestling with the outside water tap which served their beach bungalow, and whose vagaries, it seemed to her, had occupied more of their time than all their other holiday activities put together. Robert, already bored with his masculine role of conscript handyman, was leaving the job to her this time. He was lounging by the porch, looking handsome, and saying at intervals, "Come on," or "Can't you leave it for now?" And into this scene, looking more out of place than anything Joanna had ever seen in her life, stepped Corinne. Dressed in a tightly fitting black town suit, high-heeled black sandals and enormous gold earrings, she came stepping daintily through the tufts of grass and powdery dry sand, bending her head elegantly to avoid the lines of assorted garments that dangled everywhere between the bungalows.

Joanna saw her first. Saw the beautifully made-up face prepare itself to look astonished; saw this astonishment sweep over it most convincingly at exactly the right moment, as Robert looked up. And that was why, during subsequent arguments with Robert, Joanna found it so hard to believe that Corinne (having married and discarded two husbands since she had last seen him) had come "quite by accident" on her former fiancé. She "happened to be staying" at the largest hotel at this seaside town; she "happened to have two tickets" for this and that. Disgustedly, Joanna wondered how *any*

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man could swallow it, as Robert appeared to do with ease.

"Sorry, Mother, I didn't catch what you said." Joanna roused herself to attend to the old lady's chatter. Whatever happens, she thought, I mustn't let Mother find out about Corinne. She'd be terribly upset, she thinks that Robert and I are an ideal couple, and that I am the perfect wife for him. I must say, she is very sweet that way—you couldn't have a kinder, more approving mother-in-law.

Though you could have a more efficient one, she amended grimly, as Polly's cage door swung open at exactly the moment when their turn for a taxi had at last arrived. By the time the parrot had been retrieved and the crowd of delighted small boys dispersed, they had missed two more taxis, and Mrs. Trent was abject in her apologies.

"I'm so sorry, dear. I keep forgetting the latch . . ."

But the arrival of the next taxi cut her short; and it was not until they reached the bungalow that Joanna realised just how difficult it was going to be to prevent Mrs. Trent finding out about Corinne. How, for instance, was she to explain Robert's absence at this very moment, as she staggered unaided through the front door with the two suitcases and the hatbox, followed by Mrs. Trent with the parrot and the umbrella?

"Robert's awfully sorry not to be here to welcome you," she improvised hastily. "He's had to go into the village to see about—about the paraffin. For the stove," she added, firmly.

But could that really account for the whole afternoon? If—as she suspected—Robert was playing golf with Corinne again, he certainly wouldn't be back before suppertime. And anyway, he would be sure to say, "What paraffin?" if his mother mentioned it this evening. If only men had a little more tact, one wouldn't mind these things quite so much. For once, Joanna was thankful for her mother-in-law's erratic memory. With any luck, she would have forgotten all about the paraffin by the time Robert got back.

But hardly had this comforting thought come into her mind than she heard a sound which made her hold her breath. A coy tap-tap-tapping on the door she had just closed, and a familiar voice full of synthetic warmth and brightness calling: "Joanna? Are you in, Joanna, dear?"

Mrs. Pratt. Joanna cursed silently. Mrs. Pratt, the widow who lived in the cottage on the cliff, and whose hobby was watching the affairs of the summer visitors at the bungalows, and forcibly making bosom friends of as many of them as she possibly could. Joanna was well aware that Mrs. Pratt's small brown eyes had taken in every

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detail of the Corinne affair; scarcely a day had passed this week without her dropping in and trying with ill-concealed gusto to extract from Joanna some sort of reaction on the subject, which she could then pass on to the other bosom friends on her beat.

"*There* you are, my dear," she said, popping her head archly round the door. "Hiding away from little me like this! I haven't seen you all morning! Come on and tell me all your news. And—dear me—" appearing to notice Mrs. Trent for the first time "—this is . . . ?"

"This is Mrs. Trent, my husband's mother," said Joanna stiffly. "Mother, this is Mrs. Pratt, a neighbour of ours."

"Well," said Mrs. Pratt. "How nice to meet you! It'll be very nice for Joanna, I'm sure, to have a little company at last." She waited, and as neither of her listeners responded to the shaft, she tried again.

"Where *is* Robert, my dear? Surely he is here this afternoon at least, when his mother has just arrived?"

"He's gone to fetch the paraffin," said Joanna coldly.

"The *paraffin?* Surely, my dear, you must have made a mistake? They always *deliver* the paraffin. In those great drums—let me look." Before Joanna could stop her, she was on her knees examining the paraffin drum in the corner of the room.

"It's nearly full! What *can* your husband be thinking of! The poor, dear man, all that long hot walk for nothing! If I meet him, I'll tell him how sorry I am."

"I'm sure you will," said Joanna icily. "And now, I'm afraid Mother and I are going to be very busy unpacking."

Gently, she tried to edge Mrs. Pratt towards the door.

"Of course, of course, I don't want to keep you. I just thought"—Mrs. Pratt lowered her voice ostentatiously—"I don't want to cause any trouble, and I'm sure it's all right really, but as I came along I couldn't help seeing your husband sitting on the cliff among the bushes with that young woman from the hotel. Corinne, I think the name is. Corinne Fairbrother. Sitting side by side." She paused. "Of course, I'm sure it's all right. He must have just met her by chance, coming back with the paraffin. Though it's a funny way to come back. Right out of his way, you'd have thought. Still, that must have been it. And he must have sat down for a bit of a rest. It's a long walk, of course. I'm sure you've nothing to worry about, my dear. I'm sure it's all right."

"Yes, I'm sure it is," said Joanna briskly. "Goodbye, Mrs. Pratt." She allowed herself to slam the door, but only a little, because other-

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wise it would set the water pipe gurgling in that sinister way it had when it intended to produce nothing but a few brownish drops the next time you turned it on.

Turning back into the room, she noticed that her mother-in-law's usually rosy face had gone quite pale.

"*Corinne,* did she say?" she asked anxiously. "Corinne Fairbrother? Then it must be Robert's old girlfriend. The one you got him on the rebound from."

Joanna nodded—though she felt that the thing could perhaps have been phrased more elegantly. Somewhat to her surprise—and certainly to her relief—Mrs. Trent asked no further questions either then or when, later, Robert arrived back, tired and somewhat wary, to be confronted with the news of the lost binoculars. Usually, he treated his mother's absent-mindedness with tolerant amusement, teasing her over her little mishaps and making her laugh; but not this time. Under the cloud of his not unjustified displeasure, his mother's usual flow of chatter was dried up at its source; and though Joanna did her best to keep some sort of a conversation going during the evening, it was uphill work; and in the end the uncomfortable silences were broken only by Polly, who had learned to make exactly the gurgling noises produced by the faulty water pipes when they were about to go wrong.

By bedtime, Joanna was at her wit's end. If this was how it was going to be, then how on earth were they to get through the rest of the holiday? If only, she thought, Robert would at least *pretend* to be enjoying the company of his family; would make an effort, at least part of the time, to act the part of a loving husband and affectionate and dutiful son.

And up to a point, this was exactly what happened. The very next morning brought the news that the binoculars had turned up safe and sound, and this of course lightened the atmosphere considerably. Thereafter, Robert really did seem to be trying, intermittently, to please his womenfolk, honouring them with his company for at least a part of each day, and disappearing on implausible pretexts rather less frequently than before, and for rather shorter lengths of time.

In fact, as the days went by, it was her mother-in-law's disappearances that began to worry Joanna, rather than those of her husband. Even Robert began to notice them.

"Where's Mother?" he asked her one afternoon, joining her on the beach rather earlier than she'd expected. "I thought she was here with you."

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"She's gone off for a walk on the cliffs, I think," said Joanna vaguely, and with a slight sense of unease.

"Again? She's always doing that. What's the matter with her, Jo? She's so quiet these days, and keeps going off like this. What is it?"

"I think she goes to see Mrs. Pratt on the cliff sometimes," said Joanna guardedly, wondering as she spoke what new ideas Mrs. Pratt might even now be instilling into their mother's all too suggestible mind.

"And another thing," continued Robert. "She's becoming so—how can I put it?—so *reliable,* somehow. Like yesterday: you asked her to go to the farm for a dozen eggs and a pint of milk. And what does she come back with, if you please? Why, a dozen eggs and a pint of milk! Not a cauliflower, mark you! Not half a pound of butter and a kitten! What's the matter with her?"

He laughed as he spoke, and Joanna laughed with him; but behind the joking, she sensed an uneasiness in him which she could not but share. After a quick swim, impelled by a vague and unspoken anxiety, they made their way back to the bungalow.

Joanna was walking a little ahead, and so it was she who saw it first: a carelessly folded sheet of paper lying just inside the front door. Only after she had picked it up and read the brief message did she notice that it was addressed to Robert:

> "By the time you read this, I shall be dead. Forgive me, I can see no other way out.
>
> Corinne"

Together they stared at it.

"It's just a bit of play-acting, of course," said Robert at last, though his voice shook a little. "She's always threatening this sort of thing. It's . . . I . . . Look, Jo, I'm sorry! I think I'd better tell you the truth . . . !"

"If you mean the truth that you've been having an affair with the bloody woman and ruining our whole holiday, then don't bother!" burst out Joanna. "I *know* what you've been doing! As if I care! *Go* to her if you want to. . . . Smash our marriage if you want to, *I'm* not stopping you . . . !" And with tears streaming down her cheeks, she rushed towards the back door.

"Jo . . . ! Jo . . . !" He grasped her arm and pulled her back. "Jo, darling, it's *over!*" That's what I'm trying to tell you. I met her for the last time today, at the pub, and I told her once and for all that I'm *not* breaking up my marriage! No way am I getting into her

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clutches again—once in a lifetime was enough, thank you very much! She can blackmail me all she likes with these fake suicide threats—it's *over*. Do you hear me, Jo—it's over! You're the one I love. . . . You have been all along—"

How quickly Joanna would have allowed herself to be convinced, and to wallow in the joys of reconciliation, would never be known, for no sooner had he begun moving to take her into his arms than a sudden commotion made them both turn round. Stumbling, half-running through the sandy grass beyond the door, came Mrs. Trent; gasping for breath, her face scarlet, her grey curls plastered against her forehead and a wild look in her eyes.

"Corinne!" she gasped. "She's dead! She jumped over the cliff and killed herself!"

Robert gripped his mother's arm to support her.

"What do you mean? How do you know?"

"I saw her! I happened to be walking along the cliff, and I looked down and I saw her! Stone dead on the rocks below!"

"Look, Mother, sit down and tell us about it quietly. You found her dead on the rocks. How do you know it wasn't an accident? How do you know she killed herself?"

"Why, she left a note, didn't she? I—" Mrs. Trent suddenly grew more scarlet than ever, and burst into tears. Robert's voice was very grave.

"How do you know about the note? Come on, Mother, tell us exactly what happened?"

"I didn't mean to say anything about the note! Oh dear, I'm all in a muddle. I meant people to think *she'd* written it, of course. Oh dear, it's no good! Oh, Robert, *I* pushed her over the cliff! I did it for you, Robert! To save your marriage."

"Mother! How *could* you? How could you think . . . ? Oh, God, now what in the world can we . . . ? Listen! Listen, Jo—the first thing we must do—before we think of anything else—the first thing we must do is to work out how to cover up Mother's tracks before the police get onto it. You know what she is—she's bound to have left clues galore all over the place."

"I have not!" retorted his mother, with a semblance of returning dignity. "You talk as if I'm senile! I've *never* been senile, I'm only careless; all I had to do was to take care. Besides, you know what a lot of detective stories I read, I've thought of *everything*. Listen!"

She told them her story; and her precautions did indeed seem to have been astonishingly prudent.

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She had telephoned in the morning to ask Corinne to meet her on the cliff top "to talk privately about her problem with Robert." She had gone there (in gym shoes, to leave no discernible footprints), taking a flask of tea just sufficiently drugged to make Corinne fall asleep in the course of their conversation. Thus there would be no struggle—just a quick push (with gloves on to avoid fingerprints) to send the girl rolling down the grassy slope and over the cliff edge. Then—the alibi. Immediately afterwards she hurried as fast as she could to Mrs. Pratt's cottage, which stood out of sight farther back on the cliffs. Once there, she sat down for the usual cup of tea and gossip—in the course of which she made an opportunity to exclaim: "What's that? I heard someone cry out!" Mrs. Pratt, of course, heard nothing—but, knowing Mrs. Pratt as she did, Mrs. Trent was shrewd enough to realise that once the news of the tragedy became public, Mrs. Pratt would not only have heard the cry, but would claim to have recognised the voice, and in fact practically to have witnessed the whole thing. And, of course, her friend Mrs. Trent would have been sitting drinking tea with her the whole time, and thus could not possibly be suspected.

Really, it all sounded foolproof.

Except for one thing.

"That's all bloody fine, Mother!" protested Robert. "But what about *me?* Half the village must have been listening in on that row we had in the pub, with me obviously trying to break off with her, and her threatening all hell if I dared do any such thing! And then, the next thing they hear, she's fallen over a cliff! What's that going to look like for *me,* eh?"

"Oh, Robert! Oh, my dear! I never thought . . . ! Oh, what can I do . . . ?"

"You can't do anything. We'll just have to— Oh, *I* don't know—we'll just have to— Oh, God . . . !"

And though the little family talked far into the night, no conclusion could be reached except to let matters take their course. The police would come; they would do their job; and whatever would happen, would happen.

It was a long time before Joanna slept that night; and just as she was dropping off she fancied she heard a tap-tapping sound from the front of the house. Someone tapping on the door? Polly practising, in the silence of the night, the sound of Robert's typewriter? Too weary to get up and investigate, she drifted at last into an uneasy

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sleep—from which she was awakened by her mother-in-law, beaming down at her.

"It's all *right!*" Mrs. Trent was saying. "Robert is in the clear! I've typed a note as if from him, and dropped it in at that girl's hotel, saying how sorry he is about the row, and how he loves her deeply and can't live without her, and will run away with her just as soon as she likes. And I've signed it 'Rob'—that's what she used to call him—in that big scrawly writing of his. So you see, when the police find it, they'll know beyond any doubt that Robert didn't, after all, want to get rid of her, and so couldn't possibly have any motive for murdering her! *Wasn't* that a clever idea?"

Indeed it was. In fact, there was only one flaw in it. Corinne, naturally, was overjoyed when she found the note, and rushed immediately to the phone.

Mrs. Trent, who took the call, looked stunned for a moment. Then she clapped her hand to her mouth in the familiar gesture.

"There! I knew there was something! She took so long to go to sleep, and then I was in such a rush to get to Mrs. Pratt's in time for my alibi, that I clean forgot to push the girl over the edge!"

DETECTIVERSE

FOREGONE COLLUSION

by DIXIE J. WHITTED

Barrister Harrington Brew
Pled "insanity" till he was blue:
As usual, it worked,—
His client then smirked,
"I'm not crazy enough to pay *you!*"

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William Hallstead is the author of seventeen books, including six suspense novels under the pen name William Beechcroft (the first five published by Dodd, Mead; the latest by Carroll & Graf). A former flight instructor, public relations man, and public television executive, he currently makes his home on Sanibel Island, in Florida. He takes us to an even more tropical spot in this story set in an Amazonian research outpost . . .

TURKEY DURKIN AND THE CATFISH

by WILLIAM BEECHCROFT

The moment Alexander Kroll stepped off the little river steamer onto the rickety dock, Durkin knew the man was going to be trouble. Up to now, Durkin had only suspected Kroll would be a problem. After all, it was highly unlikely that the untrained nephew of the Kroll Foundation's chairman would be a scientific asset here at Research Station 4, halfway up the Amazon. Now that Durkin saw Kroll in the flesh, his suspicion hardened into realization that scrambling up the bank, followed by one of the deck hands laden with two glossy leather suitcases, was trouble.

Kroll looked to Durkin as if he had been rudely transported to the middle Amazon from a Broad Street sporting goods store. He arrived sweating at the bank's crest, in now-soiled chinos and a ridiculous pith helmet, towered over Durkin, and said, "Why in hell don't you build some steps up from the dock?"

"Because the six-month rainy season floods the river nearly up to this level," Durkin said evenly. "Alexander Kroll, I presume."

"Yeah. Where can I find Durkin? I'm supposed to—" Begrudged enlightenment seeped across Kroll's precisely chiseled features. "Could *you* be him?"

Durkin knew he looked unprepossessing in his grubby khakis, but surely not that unprepossessing.

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"I am he." He stuck out an unenthusiastic hand. He hadn't asked for help, he didn't need help, yet here in the guise of an assistant stood Chairman Oliver Kroll's dim-bulb nephew, exiled to mitigate the Philadelphia fallout of a scandal involving Kroll with some married Main Line socialite. So had come the rumor in a letter from one of Felicia's Upper Darby friends. Uncle Oliver had alleviated the family problem by making Nephew Alexander a problem for Durkin now. The man had no marine biology background at all, Durkin had noted. "Alex is a Cornell man," the chairman had written. "I believe his major was hotel management."

Hotel management. Maybe here among the ragtag frame structures of this Amazon Astoria he could see that Durkin's little cadre of Bororo Indians turned down the sheets on the cots at night and left a fresh orchid on each pillow.

"Take him under your wing," the chairman's letter had directed. "Teach him what you can."

"Teach him what you can." A key phrase. Not, "Teach him everything," but "what you can," a tip-off that this bronzed giant now recovering from his huff-and-puff up the riverbank was of limited mental prowess. The huffing and puffing told Durkin something more: the man's healthy glow had probably been acquired in a Philadelphia health club—amplified by more recent lounging on the steamer's gritty little deck during its five-hundred-mile ramble upriver from Belem.

Kroll dramatically shaded his eyes, despite the pith helmet's overhanging brim. "Now that I'm here, exactly where am I?"

"Roughly between Oriximina and Terra Santa," Durkin rattled off with a touch of pleasure at Kroll's wince.

"God. What is there to do around here besides whatever you do for the foundation?"

Durkin smiled. "There's an opera house in Manaus, the closest city of any size."

"Where's Manaus?"

"By river, three hundred miles west."

"Jesus."

The deckhand plunked down the bags and gave Kroll a burlesque salute, a lopsided grin, and muttered something that didn't sound complimentary.

"What did he say? I don't speak Spanish."

"Neither does he. That was the Portuguese equivalent of 'Have a nice day.' "

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Kroll looked around as if he were expecting to summon a bellman, then he gave a whistling sigh, bent down and hefted his two bags. They walked down the path from the riverbank, Durkin in the lead, Kroll puffing behind.

"Jesus!" Kroll said again, this time with more vehemence. Durkin knew his unasked-for assistant had just gotten his first real look at Station 4.

"This is all there is to it? This clearing at the edge of the jungle?"

"Research building on the right, mess hut straight ahead, storage and generator buildings between." Durkin nodded at the weather-faded, clapboard building to their left, a long, low, shedlike structure. "Living quarters. Felicia and I are in the near side. You can take your stuff to the other end."

"I heard your wife is here with you. When do I meet the 'little woman'?"

Now that struck Durkin as just about the patronizing limit. He'd already had it with this Philadelphia philanderer, had it at first glance. He instinctively disliked anyone that much taller than his own five-foot-seven. Moreover, Kroll had the good looks of a men's sleepwear model, a distressing contrast to Durkin's sallow boniness. Even in his soiled chinos, Kroll managed to project a debonair aura, an effect peculiarly enhanced by his hard-traveled appearance. Durkin's trousers and shirt-sleeves seemed to flap around his skinny limbs even in the still air of the rain forest.

A faint odor of spice drifted among the fetid smells of the river and the underlying stink of rotting vegetation. Kroll's shaving lotion, for God's sake, and this late in the day.

"The little woman," Kroll had said, as if the likes of Durkin would attract only the kind of mousy, vapid, workaday wife that trite expression anticipated.

"She will join us at supper. Right now, it's siesta time for her."

The whole station, in fact, was asleep: Felicia, the two stolid male Bororo Indians (Durkin thought they were Bororos, but in a country that had encouraged racial intermarriage for decades, it was hard to be precise), the pair of equally impassive middle-aged Indian females, and Agata, the younger, almost pretty, Bororo girl in her twenties, the best worker of the five.

Employer to employee, Durkin showed Kroll to his barren quarters, pointed out the screened-off wooden tank that served as their bathtub when the run-off from the roof was enough to fill it, and left the man to settle in until suppertime.

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"I thought I heard the steamer leaving," Felicia murmured sleepily from inside the mosquito netting tent over her cot. "Is he here?"

"He's here."

"Is he what you expected?"

"Exactly." Durkin sat back in one of their creaky wooden chairs and watched her doze again. When he had literally run into her at the University of Florida during his graduate studies, she had looked like an English Lit major—which she had turned out to be, with an IQ way up there. That had appealed to him only minutes after they had clashed cafeteria trays. He saw right past the beesting breasts and bony hips beneath her bag of a dress. He liked her for her brain, which electrified her. And which was why, when he asked her two months later to marry him, she breathed a fervent, "Oh, yes!"

Intimacy was new to Durkin, and he liked its novelty, but not all the mental strain that went with it. Felicia Noonan Durkin was not an easy coupler. She wanted her moments of culmination to be bracketed by persuasive forehappenings and lengthy afterglows. All of which seriously paled for Durkin after a few months. He loved her, sure, but . . . He was aware that she lamented the fast fade of their initial bliss.

Then, one year to the day from the date of their marriage, they found themselves up the Amazon. Literally. Five hundred miles from the northeast coast.

"And six hundred miles south of Paramaribo. A *thousand* miles from Rio," she had lamented when the asthmatic river steamer had bumped them ashore. The research station's frame structures would have failed the lowest of Pocono Mountain summer camp standards. The five Indian assistants were day workers who had the good sense to return to their own no doubt more comfortable village a mile southward, along a rank path Durkin was never to have the slightest impulse to explore.

The Durkins replaced a scraggly, bearded skeleton named Warnowski, a wreck of a Ph.D. who had been sent here by the foundation the year before. His specialty was supposed to have been the freshwater stingray, but observation told Durkin it now was the pinchbottle. Not long after the steamer, with Warnowski aboard, chugged out of sight around the sharp bend to the east, they found an unopened bottle of Haig & Haig behind the tattered linens in the residency cupboard. Durkin poured the Scotch onto the spongy ground behind the building.

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A year here had changed them both. With little to do in the oppressive climate, Felicia grew lethargic, but at the same time she blossomed like a lush, tropical flower. The bony hips filled out. The pathetic little breast buds blossomed. Unexpectedly, Durkin found himself drawn to a soft, warm, compelling female. He liked the surprising excitement of that, and he liked his work for the foundation. After he learned something of the ways of the Bororos, he liked them, too. Everything here had fallen satisfyingly into place for him.

Now the heavy hand of nepotism in far-off Pennsylvania threatened to, well, screw it up with the mandated arrival of Alexander Kroll.

The big man from Philadelphia ambled into the mess hut fifteen minutes after Agata, slender and sleek in brightly dyed homespun, had served a thin fish soup.

"I thought in South America, you ate late," were his first words.

"We eat early so the Indians can get to their village before dark," Durkin informed him. But Kroll was not listening.

"So *this* is the missus. Well, well, well. A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Durkin."

"Please, Felicia, Mr. Kroll."

"And I will be most happy if you will call me Alex." He seemed to be undergoing a transition to smooth civility as Durkin watched.

"The menu for tonight?" Kroll asked her.

"Fish broth and—" She spoke with the hovering Agata in rapid Portuguese, which she had picked up with little trouble, then turned back to Kroll. "Roast pork and manioc. With papaya for dessert."

"Impressive, here in the middle of nowhere."

Felicia smiled at Kroll's compliment, obviously enjoying her unaccustomed gracious hostess role. "Agata spent a few years in Manaus. She was a chef's assistant at the Restaurante Palhoca. We're very fortunate."

The delicious aroma of roast pork loin, carved from a wild boar the two Indian men had speared in honor of the occasion, provided a veneer of civilization in the raw hut. But it was abruptly shattered by a hair-raising screech across the broad river.

"Jaguar. Getting ready for the hunt. They hardly ever get over this side." Durkin said that perfunctorily because he had just realized something that was a lot more disturbing than a jaguar's evening scream. He had just been struck by the fact that since Kroll had entered the mess hut, his speculative slate-blue gaze had never

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once wavered from Felicia until the jaguar's shriek had split the outside silence.

"Breakfast at seven," Durkin said coldly. "In the lab at seven-thirty. I'll teach you what I can."

Kroll was not a morning person, Durkin decided. At breakfast, the man met Durkin's "Good morning" with no more than a surly nod. In silence, he downed two cups of Agata's excellent arabica coffee in an apparent effort to jolt himself fully awake. Then he leaned back in his camp chair and stared up at the underside of the thatched roof.

"God," he muttered in disgust. "There are live things crawling up there."

"We stay in our part of this little world, they stay in theirs." Durkin, incorrigibly task-oriented, glanced at his watch. "Time to get to work, Kroll."

The research building was the best-built structure in the compound. Its corrugated metal roof protected the lab at one end. The rest of the large interior was occupied by rows of bubbling aquariums. The lights here and in the other buildings, the ceaselessly humming aquarium pumps, the laboratory electrical outlets, and the emergency radio in the mess hut were powered by a throbbing gasoline-fueled generator in the adjacent shack. So Durkin informed Kroll as he toured his superfluous assistant through the lab, then into the area of the holding tanks.

"That was the damned thrum-thrum-thrum I heard all night," Kroll said with a grimace.

"After you've been here a while, you won't notice the generator at all. Now in this first tank—"

"Felicia doesn't join us for breakfast?"

"Seven's too early for her." Durkin tapped his forefinger on the edge of the murky tank to focus Kroll's wandering attention. "In here is an impressive example of *Electrophorus electricus*. Notice these two fine wires leading to the volt meter on the side of the tank. The purpose—"

"Wait a minute, Durkin. In English, okay? Electro-for-what?"

"I thought the technical name was self-evident, along with your keen visual observation."

"Looks like a fat watersnake to me."

"It's an Amazon electric eel, capable of a discharge up to five hundred fifty volts. Enough to stun a horse."

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"Why him?"

"I don't follow you, Kroll."

"What are you doing with this guy?"

At least that crude question was a flicker of interest.

"I'm tabulating precise measurements of its discharge rates, voltage peaks, and eventually, its controllability."

Kroll shrugged. "Why?"

"There may be certain medical, even military applications. The latter is classified," he said with a degree of satisfaction. "Next, we have three tanks of *Sphaeroides annulatus.*"

"Uh huh. Look like fish to me."

"They are fish. Not native here, they're west coast Gulf puffers. Saltwater fish, but the foundation has no facility in that area, so they're here. The flesh is edible, even delicious. But the intestines, liver, gonads, and skin contain tetrodotoxin, a deadly poison." Durkin was in lecture mode now, a status he enjoyed. "The victim first notices tingling of the lips and tongue. That develops into numbness of the entire body, respiratory difficulty, hemorrhages of the skin, muscle twitches, tremors, then convulsions. There's no antidote and only a forty percent survival rate. The foundation is interested in the puffer's pharmacological possibilities."

"Swell," was all Kroll had to say.

They moved on to an outsized tank of brownish water that seemed paved with large, fleshy discs.

"Stingrays," Kroll offered, apparently unimpressed by a creature so commonplace.

"*Potamotrygon motoro,* the Amazon variety of freshwater stingray. The venomous stinging barb on this variety is situated well out on the tail instead of at its base."

"So?"

"So that weapon near the end of the long whip of a tail makes the *Potamotrygon* among the most dangerous of the species. The wound is hugely painful, of course, and stings in the upper-body areas have been known to be fatal. Again, there is no specific antivenin."

Kroll bent to peer into the tank, shrugged, and straightened. Durkin waited for his obvious question, but he said nothing.

"The purpose of the rays' being here is the simple extraction of venom for shipment to a Miami research lab in search of an antidote."

Sweat began to stain Kroll's shirt, not from the impact of this little hall of aquatic terrors, Durkin surmised, but from the oppressive humidity.

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"Next we come to *Urinophilus erythrurus*, members of the catfish family, known locally as 'candiru.' " Durkin crouched to observe the dozens of tiny fish hovering near the bottom of the brackish tank. "Barely two inches long—some of them not even that—these are one of the most fascinating of the dangerous marine animals. They may have a unique military application if—"

But Kroll wasn't listening. His attention had wandered upward to the slot of a window across the narrow room, then beyond to the woman who ambled across the compound toward the mess hut. Lithe in blue slacks and a white blouse, Felicia was on her way to breakfast.

"Kroll? Kroll!"

"Yeah, what?"

"Your first duty is to take that broom over there and sweep this place clean." Agata would be happy, Durkin thought, to be relieved of her research building cleaning duties. Dynamic balance, in a way, since she was now cooking for another mouth.

"Sweep? Hell, this is a dirt floor."

"All the more reason to keep it swept. After that, report to me in the lab. There are housecleaning opportunities there as well."

That should take care of Mr. Alexander Kroll for today. Durkin strode into the lab, satisfied that he had properly fitted the man into the scheme of things. At the bottom.

But at lunch, with Felicia joining them briefly, Kroll appeared newly energized.

"Quite a little chamber of horrors your hubby has there." He nodded over his shoulder in the direction of the lab. "Convinced me to stay out of the river at all costs."

At least I made some inroad into that pudding of a brain, Durkin thought, but he still didn't like the way Kroll's eyes addressed Felicia alone.

"Back to work," he ordered as Agata cleared away the remains of her version of Caldeirada, a fish stew thickened with farina and doused with a peppery sauce.

In the afternoon, Durkin instructed the two Bororo men to repair the siding on the generator shed, and he sent Kroll to help them. That ought to complete stage one of the useless fellow's basic training. The Indians were not delighted to spend the steamy afternoon replacing warped boards with newer ones from the lumber stockpile, but they stuck at it. Which was more than Kroll did. At 3:45, Durkin discovered he was missing.

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. . . And found him sprawled on the little verandah behind the residence, a glass of lemonade in hand, and Felicia seated nearby.

"I was under the impression that I'd told you—"

"Enough's enough, professor. Seems to me we have a minimum to do and all the time in the world to do it."

"The foundation is expecting—"

"Oh, Emmett," Felicia broke in. "It's his first day. Besides, I haven't had anyone from the outside to talk to since we've come here."

Thus dismissing Durkin, she turned back to Kroll. "The Turners in Bryn Mawr, did you know them, too?"

That night after supper ("Fish *again?*" Kroll had snorted as if the chef at this resort had lost all imagination), Durkin found his patience further stressed as he and Felicia prepared for bed.

"He has no interest in what we're doing here," he grumped. "And the man didn't finish what I told him to do. So endeth the day with Mr. Kroll."

"But he is amusing in a way." In the dim light from the naked twenty-five-watt bulb overhead, Felicia's sea-green eyes were more alive than Durkin had noticed in weeks. Months. His heart stuttered.

"Amusing?"

"He's brought all the latest Main Line gossip."

"Including the little incident concerning himself?"

"Well, that may have been as much her doing as his. Those things are never totally one-sided. It takes two, doesn't it?"

"You're defending the man."

"I'm being impartial. Go to sleep."

Through the following week, Durkin assigned Kroll to a succession of minor tasks which Kroll performed in lackadaisical fashion, or in one instance, not at all. That one involved the meal worms in a covered tray in a corner of the aquarium area. The worms were propagated as food, primarily for the puffers and the candiru.

"Damned if I'll touch those squirmy things," Kroll announced, and he stalked out of the building.

"You'll do as I say!" Durkin shouted after him. But the big man walked on as if Durkin had said nothing at all. A half hour later, Durkin spotted the two of them, Kroll and Felicia, strolling along the riverbank.

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"You, sir," he assailed Kroll at dinner, "are a disgrace to the work of your uncle's foundation."

Kroll smiled. "But here I am, Durkin. And Uncle Oliver says here I stay. For a whole goddamn year." His smile had begun as one of mirth at Durkin's impotent railing. Now it was one of mockery.

Later, in the darkness after a long silence, Durkin said quietly, "He's trouble, Felicia, and you're . . . not helping."

From her side of the muggy room, he heard nothing.

"Felicia?"

He felt her weight on the edge of his creaky cot.

"He's just a big boy in a man's body, Emmett. Try to understand him."

She thrust the mosquito netting aside. "He amuses me, but you're my husband." Which struck Durkin as a peculiar way to put it, and what ensued seemed more palliative than passionate.

"You will bear in mind," Durkin told Kroll in the lab a week later, "she is my wife." As soon as he had said that, he realized how ludicrous it must have sounded to this hulking playboy. If Durkin had been the six-foot-one, two-hundred-pounder, and if he had snarled, "She is *my* wife!" at a hundred-forty-pound, chicken-boned Kroll, it would have come off as dramatic. But the actuality of Kroll towering over him while he squawked up at the man made the implied threat toothless. Even comical.

"Don't scare me, prof." A grin displayed Kroll's beautifully capped teeth. "Hey, listen, I'm not going to sweep, saw, or pick worms today, okay? Time for a day off. Mind if I borrow the canoe or dugout or whatever that thing is down there at the dock?"

"Yes, I do mind."

"I thought you would," Kroll said amiably, and he walked out.

"Come back here!" Durkin fumed. Then he got hold of himself. Another couple of minutes, and Kroll would have had him shaking his finger and stamping his foot. To hell with the man. Surely he could trust Felicia to . . . not to . . . Hadn't she called Kroll a mere boy?

He went about his lab work with more equanimity than he had felt for days. When Kroll had not reappeared by lunchtime, he didn't find that disturbing. With luck, the man had fallen out of the boat, and piranhas had picked him to the bone. Except that Durkin had seen no trace of that deadly little scavenger in this vicinity.

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When Felicia also failed to appear at the mess hut, Durkin decided to take a not-so-casual stroll along the riverbank. Just as he reached the drop-off, he spotted them exiting the dugout. He stepped back so that he was hidden from below by the crest of the bank. The man's got me spying on my own wife, he realized guiltily. Then his guilt turned to futile anger. Felicia's bright frock (where did that come from?) had merged with Kroll's suntans. They were embracing down there!

Live and let live? Through lunch, Durkin found himself assailed by anger, frustration, then disillusionment—with Felicia, and with his own sense of leadership. He was in charge here. Yet Kroll, an inferior example of manhood if ever there was one, and his own wife, whose superior intellect had captivated Durkin in the first place, showed signs of running amok. And Durkin found himself powerless to do anything about it.

Then the Indians sensed what was afoot here. Until now, the four older ones had never turned their backs on him. Even when they had been hard at work and he approached, they'd managed to face him respectfully until he had nodded and passed by. Now, except when he was directly addressing them, he found himself pointedly ignored.

Agata had been less subservient than they, but she had managed to convey respect through her tiny, ever-present smile. But now she had erased that pleasantry. Her bittersweet chocolate eyes seemed to pierce his, to spear straight into his brain and find cravenness there.

He was a marine biologist, not an expert in conjugal relations. He had no idea what to do, so he did nothing.

Next, Kroll didn't bother to appear in the research building at all. He sunbathed on the rustic verandah, he strolled around the compound. He disappeared for hours, and Durkin noticed more and more frequently, so did Felicia. Along the river in the dugout? Down the path that led to the Bororo village? Maybe even to some secluded place here on the grounds? Where they went had to remain a mystery because Durkin refused to lower himself to searching for them.

He asked Agata to return to her former part-time chore of research building housecleaning and was gratified that she accepted without a sign of protest.

At length, Felicia didn't seem to care whether Durkin noticed her barely suppressed state of newfound excitement, her frequently flushed face, her often-rumpled clothing. The two of them surely

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knew he knew, and he was further depressed that they apparently weren't concerned.

He felt he faced two dismal choices: confrontation, which he would undoubtedly lose; had already, in fact, lost. Or endurance. Surely Felicia's innate intelligence would surmount her infatuation with this physically attractive—to her—novelty who had enlivened her boring existence here. Durkin could even relate to that. He had his absorbing work, but she'd had . . . what? An abortive try at a first novel which now mildewed somewhere in a residence building storage closet. Then she had begun to catalog fauna that she observed in the clearing. That, too, died in the endless days of compressing heat and sudden, drenching rainfalls. Now she had Alexander Kroll. Another fad, Durkin could hope.

For two more weeks, Station 4 endured a balance of tensions. Durkin's gripping anger was mitigated by the interesting fact that Felicia still came to him occasionally, and he even found quirky stimulation in that apparent atonement for her fascination with Kroll.

Further offsetting Durkin's hatred of Kroll was the man's obvious physical superiority. In bare-knuckled conflict, Heaven forbid, Durkin knew he would quickly be reduced to mincemeat.

Perhaps he could conceivably devise some nonconfrontational means of settling with his now detested "assistant." A slice of Gulf puffer liver slipped into Kroll's fish stew? But murder was not in Durkin's soul.

The Indians now pointedly faced away whenever he neared. They took his orders, they did their work, but they would not show him their faces. Except Agata. She could hardly work the mess hut without facing its diners, but her fetching little smile had suffered an apparently permanent death. Her expression now was one of stone.

He could live with that. He could live with the backs of the other Bororos giving him what constituted a version of continuous jungle "mooning." He could even live with Kroll's refusal to do anything at all by way of useful work. He would survive Felicia's fling, and Kroll's high-handed relationship with her. Because he had to, and because this wasn't Philadelphia. It was the Amazon riverbank, three hundred miles from anything real, and they had all become sunstruck. Heat-driven. Crazy.

Then Kroll did something that upset the uneasy dynamics of Station 4. He did it one evening at dinner, after he and Felicia had been missing most of the afternoon. What he did probably did not

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seem to him to be more than adolescent teasing. But to Durkin, it was an unpardonable bombshell.

Kroll wiped his mouth, settled back in his groaning wood-slat chair, chuckled to himself.

And he said to Durkin, "I understand they used to call you 'Turkey.' Haw-haw-haw."

Durkin felt blood rise over his limp shirt collar, race along his jaw, and suffuse his cheeks with crimson.

"Haw-haw! Gotcha, Turkey," Kroll blathered. "Has a nice ring: 'Turkey Durkin.' "

Durkin glanced at Felicia. She smiled at Kroll. She had *told* Kroll!

God, how Durkin had hated that nickname. All nicknames. In private grade school, a nine-year-old lump had called him "Emmy." Durkin was undersized, with a piping little voice. The more he protested, the worse it got until the whole school was chanting, "Emmy, Emmy, your name is femmy!"

In public high school, he was for a time free of the taunts of what he had considered the snobbish rich kids. Then some wag came up with "Spider," all too appropriate for a skinny runt with toothpick arms and legs. He lived miserably with that all the way to graduation. Then he left it behind with a sense of relief when he entered U. of P. Whereupon another mental Visigoth struck upon the euphonious "Turkey." Turkey Durkin did have a catchy ring. It stuck with him all four years, followed him through graduate studies. Then he'd thought he'd left it at the University of Florida—where he had met Felicia Noonan, coincidentally from Philadelphia. She had never used the horrible nickname.

Yet now she had told Kroll, and they had unified to ridicule him. That hit Durkin like an icicle plunged straight down his throat to explode into frigid shards deep in his gut.

But as his hands gripped his chair arms in a rictus of fury, he realized he was as incapable of standing up to this chortling lout as he had been of confronting his tormentors from the age of nine.

Perhaps Felicia was putting him to a test, something she may have concocted from equal parts of boredom, Durkin's gradual transferral of passion from her to his work—he had unconsciously been doing that, hadn't he—and the availability of Kroll. She had escalated the challenge from obvious attraction to the man, through stages of increasing intimacy, to out-and-out infidelity. Durkin had done nothing. Now she was employing, through Kroll, raw derision. At last, Durkin had found that unendurable.

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But though he now seethed with fury, he was still the same man behind it, a man unable to assail Kroll head-on, and just as incapable of waylaying him along the Station's latrine path and firing a bullet into his heart. In fact, there was no firearm available. Durkin wouldn't hear of it. A spear? Surely one of the Indians would be able to provide one. But the thought of even the likes of Kroll twisting on the end of a length of hardwood pole turned Durkin's blood cold.

Now Felicia and Kroll flaunted their affaire Amazonia, as Durkin had bitterly termed it to himself. One late afternoon, when he had trudged across the compound from the research building, he heard laughter. Felicia's giggles, then Kroll's deeper chuckle. This, from behind the screening of the oversized rain tub. They were in the thing together, their clothing hung over the woven screen panels like defiant flags.

A surge of hot fury made Durkin's head thunder. Unendurable, that laughter. Simply unendurable. His fists knotted. His throat threatened to close. Yet he strode away.

At supper, she clung to Kroll's arm, all pretense now dissolved in the rain forest's fetid air.

"What's for dinner, Turkey?" Kroll boomed, and they were shaken by helpless laughter, drunk on each other. She had passed over the line, out of Durkin's life into Kroll's. If life had a way of balancing inequities, Durkin thought, surely such a balance was long overdue.

Then the evening rains, as predictable as sunset in this post-flood-season month, stopped. The water in the run-off tank that served as their jungle hot tub grew algae-ridden and dank. On Durkin's order, one of the Indians drained it.

Yet, several afternoons later, Durkin heard splashing and mirth from behind the screening.

"Had the Indians fill it with buckets from the river," Kroll blithely told him at supper. Now the man had even taken over compound management; ordered the Indians to fill the tank with river water . . .

When he heard Felicia's first shrill scream, Durkin looked up from the volt meter on the *Electrophorus*'s aquarium. When Kroll's hoarse yell joined in, and the Indians began to lope across the compound toward the rear of the residence building, Durkin set down his notes and trotted out of the lab.

By the time he reached the screened-off tank, all five of the Bororos had crowded inside, between the tank and the screening, all of

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them jabbering but uncertain as to what to do about the naked, panic-stricken white man and woman thrashing in the murky water.

"God Almighty!" Kroll screeched at Durkin, *"get us out of here!"* The man's face contorted in a grimace of terror. He was still coherent, but his words were overridden by Felicia's hysterical screams.

On Durkin's order, the two male Indians began to hoist Kroll from the murky water. As he emerged, the shouts of the Bororos merged into an eerie chant, three syllables, over and over.

"What . . ." Kroll managed through clenched teeth, "what's . . . 'candy-roo'?" Then he pawed himself frantically. "Oh, *God!*"

" 'Candiru,' they're saying," Durkin told him over Felicia's cries. "The little catfish I tried to explain to you in the lab. They burrow straight into any body opening, and because of their rear-facing barbs, they can be removed only by surgery."

"Jesus! In this tank? How—" Kroll's question disintegrated in a pain-wracked moan.

"Incredible," Durkin said. "To all of us, I'm sure."

The two of them were hauled out, naked and writhing, wrapped in blankets, and carried into the residence. A day later, summoned by the emergency radio, a fast outboard from Oriximina picked them up to return them to the small airstrip there. By then, Kroll and Felicia were pitifully weak, fever-wracked, only semi-coherent. With prompt surgical attention in Belem, though, they would at least live.

In a week, perhaps several, the state of Para would send an investigator. Durkin could almost hear the conversation now.

"You say, señor, the Bororos filled the tank from the river. Very careless."

"They did as they were ordered."

"By you, Señor Durkin?"

"No, by Mr. Kroll."

"I see. Unfortunate that the Bororos did not notice the candiru in their buckets."

"The river is always muddy here. See for yourself."

"*Si*, you are right." The inspector would shrug. "An accident. And Señor Kroll seems to have brought it about by his ignorance."

And that would be that.

The day after the fast boat had rushed Kroll and Felicia eastward, the compound seemed to exist in suspended animation. Agata ar-

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rived glum-faced to clean the research building, strode past Durkin as if he didn't exist, seized the broom and began to work her way along the row of aquariums.

Then she stopped, and bent down to peer into the candiru tank.

In accented English, she said, "Empty? Tank empty?"

Durkin gazed at her, his face as impassive as that of any of the Bororos.

Shortly, she left the research building to prepare his lunch. When he crossed the compound toward the mess hut an hour later, the two male Indians suddenly turned from the work on the generator shack's loose door hinge and faced him respectfully.

That was a welcome change.

In the mess hut, when Agata brought in his broiled fish, her smile had returned. As she leaned down to set the plate at his place, her breast softly brushed his shoulder, something that had never happened before. He found that quite heartwarming.

Even exciting.

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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE CAROL OATES

In 1987, Joyce Carol Oates made her first explicit venture into the mystery genre with a novel published under the pseudonym Rosamund Smith; but she was always one of the great masters of psychological suspense, and the following story ranks with her best . . .

THE MODEL

by JOYCE CAROL OATES

1. The Approach of Mr. Starr

Had he stepped out of nowhere, or had he been watching her for some time, even more than he'd claimed, and for a different purpose?—she shivered to think that, yes, probably, she had many times glimpsed him in the village, or in the park, without really seeing him: him, and the long gleaming black limousine she would not have known to associate with him even had she noticed him: the man who called himself Mr. Starr.

As, each day, her eyes passed rapidly and lightly over any number of people both familiar to her and strangers, blurred as in the background of a film in which the foreground is the essential reality, the very point of the film.

She was seventeen. It was in fact the day after her birthday, a bright gusty January day, and she'd been running in the late afternoon, after school, in the park overlooking the ocean, and she'd just turned to head toward home, pausing to wipe her face, adjust her damp cotton headband, feeling the accelerated strength of her heartbeat and the pleasant ache of her leg muscles: and she glanced up, shy, surprised, and there he stood, a man she had never knowingly seen before. He was smiling at her, his smile broad and eager, hope-

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ful, and he stood in such a way, leaning lightly on a cane, as to block her way on the path; yet tentatively too, with a gentlemanly, deferential air, so as to suggest that he meant no threat. When he spoke, his voice sounded hoarse as if from disuse. "Excuse me!—hello! Young lady! I realize that this is abrupt, and an intrusion on your privacy, but I am an artist, and I am looking for a model, and I wonder if you might be interested in posing for me? Only here, I mean, in the park—in full daylight! I am willing to pay, per hour—"

Sybil stared at the man. Like most young people she was incapable of estimating ages beyond thirty-five—this strange person might have been in his forties, or well into his fifties. His thin, lank hair was the color of antique silver—perhaps he was even older. His skin was luridly pale, grainy, and rough; he wore glasses with lenses so darkly tinted as to suggest the kind of glasses worn by the blind; his clothes were plain, dark, conservative—a tweed jacket that fitted him loosely, a shirt buttoned tight to the neck, and no tie, highly polished black leather shoes in an outmoded style. There was something hesitant, even convalescent in his manner, as if, like numerous others in this coastal Southern California town with its population of the retired, the elderly, and the infirm, he had learned by experience to carry himself with care; he could not entirely trust the earth to support him. His features were refined, but worn; subtly distorted, as if seen through wavy glass, or water.

Sybil didn't like it that she couldn't see the man's eyes. Except to know that he was squinting at her, hard. The skin at the corners of his eyes was whitely puckered as if, in his time, he'd done a good deal of squinting and smiling.

Quickly, but politely, Sybil murmured, "No, thank you, I can't."

She was turning away, but still the man spoke, apologetically, "I realize this is a—surprise, but, you see, I don't know how else to make inquiries. I've only just begun sketching in the park, and—"

"Sorry!"

Sybil turned, began to run, not hurriedly, by no means in a panic, but at her usual measured pace, her head up and her arms swinging at her sides. She was, for all that she looked younger than her seventeen years, not an easily frightened girl, and she was not frightened now; but her face burned with embarrassment. She hoped that no one in the park who knew her had been watching—Glencoe was a small town, and the high school was about a mile away. Why had that preposterous man approached *her?*

He was calling after her, probably waving his cane after her—she didn't dare look back. "I'll be here tomorrow! My name is Starr!

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Don't judge me too quickly—please! I'm true to my word! My name is Starr! I'll pay you, per hour"—and here he cited an exorbitant sum, nearly twice what Sybil made babysitting or working as a librarian's assistant at the branch library near her home, when she could get hired.

She thought, astonished, He must be mad!

2. The Temptation

No sooner had Sybil Blake escaped from the man who called himself Starr, running up Buena Vista Boulevard to Santa Clara, up Santa Clara to Meridian, and so to home, than she began to consider that Mr. Starr's offer was, if preposterous, very tempting. She had never modeled of course, but, in art class at the high school, some of her classmates had modeled, fully clothed, just sitting or standing about in ordinary poses, and she and others had sketched them, or tried to—it was really not so easy as it might seem, sketching the lineaments of the human figure; it was still more difficult, sketching an individual's face. But modeling, in itself, was effortless, once you overcame the embarrassment of being stared at. It was, you might argue, a morally neutral activity.

What had Mr. Starr said—*Only here, in the park. In full daylight. I'm true to my word!*

And Sybil needed money, for she was saving for college; she was hoping too to attend a summer music institute at U.C. Santa Barbara. (She was a voice student, and she'd been encouraged by her choir director at the high school to get good professional training.) Her Aunt Lora Dell Blake, with whom she lived, and had lived since the age of two years eight months, was willing to pay her way—was determined to pay her way—but Sybil felt uneasy about accepting money from Aunt Lora, who worked as a physical therapist at a medical facility in Glencoe, and whose salary, at the top of the pay structure available to her as a state employee, was still modest by California standards. Sybil reasoned that her Aunt Lora Dell could not be expected to support her forever.

A long time ago, Sybil had lost her parents, both of them together, in one single cataclysmic hour, when she'd been too young to comprehend what Death was, or was said to be. They had died in a boating accident on Lake Champlain, Sybil's mother at the age of twenty-six, Sybil's father at the age of thirty-one, very attractive

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young people, a "popular couple" as Aunt Lora spoke of them, choosing her words with care, and saying very little more. *For why ask,* Aunt Lora seemed to be warning Sybil, — *you will only make yourself cry.* As soon as she could manage the move, and as soon as Sybil was placed permanently in her care, Aunt Lora had come to California, to this sun-washed coastal town midway between Santa Monica and Santa Barbara. Glencoe was less conspicuously affluent than either of these towns, but, with its palm-lined streets, its sunny placidity, and its openness to the ocean, it was the very antithesis, as Aunt Lora said, of Wellington, Vermont, where the Blakes had lived for generations. (After their move to California, Lora Dell Blake had formally adopted Sybil as her child: thus Sybil's name was Blake, as her mother's had been. If asked what her father's name had been, Sybil would have had to think before recalling, dimly, "Conte.") Aunt Lora spoke so negatively of New England in general and Vermont in particular, Sybil felt no nostalgia for it; she had no sentimental desire to visit her birthplace, not even to see her parents' graves. From Aunt Lora's stories, Sybil had the idea that Vermont was damp and cold twelve months of the year, and frigidly, impossibly cold in winter; its wooded mountains were unlike the beautiful snow-capped mountains of the West, and cast shadows upon its small, cramped, depopulated, and impoverished old towns. Aunt Lora, a transplanted New Englander, was vehement in her praise of California—"With the Pacific Ocean to the west," she said, "it's like a room with one wall missing. Your instinct is to look out, not back; and it's a good instinct."

Lora Dell Blake was the sort of person who delivers statements with an air of inviting contradiction. But, tall, rangy, restless, belligerent, she was not the sort of person most people wanted to contradict.

Indeed, Aunt Lora had never encouraged Sybil to ask questions about her dead parents, or about the tragic accident that had killed them; if she had photographs, snapshots, mementos of life back in Wellington, Vermont, they were safely hidden away, and Sybil had not seen them. "It would just be too painful," she told Sybil, "—for us both." The remark was both a plea and a warning.

Of course, Sybil avoided the subject.

She prepared carefully chosen words, should anyone happen to ask her why she was living with her aunt, and not her parents; or, at least, one of her parents. But—this was Southern California, and

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very few of Sybil's classmates were living with the set of parents with whom they'd begun. No one asked.

An orphan?—I'm not an orphan, Sybil would say. *I was never an orphan because my Aunt Lora was always there.*

I was two years old when it happened, the accident.

No, I don't remember.

But no one asked.

Sybil told her Aunt Lora nothing about the man in the park—the man who called himself Starr—she'd put him out of her mind entirely and yet, in bed that night, drifting into sleep, she found herself thinking suddenly of him, and seeing him again, vividly. That silver hair, those gleaming black shoes. His eyes hidden behind dark glasses. How tempting, his offer!—though there was no question of Sybil accepting it. Absolutely not.

Still, Mr. Starr seemed harmless. Well-intentioned. An eccentric, of course, but *interesting*. She supposed he had money, if he could offer her so much to model for him. There was something *not contemporary* about him. The set of his head and shoulders. That air about him of gentlemanly reserve, courtesy—even as he'd made his outlandish request. In Glencoe, in the past several years, there had been a visible increase in homeless persons and derelicts, especially in the oceanside park, but Mr. Starr was certainly not one of these.

Then Sybil realized, as if a door, hitherto locked, had swung open of its own accord, that she'd seen Mr. Starr before . . . somewhere. In the park, where she ran most afternoons for an hour? In downtown Glencoe? On the street?—in the public library? In the vicinity of Glencoe Senior High School?—in the school itself, in the auditorium? Sybil summoned up a memory as if by an act of physical exertion: the school choir, of which she was a member, had been rehearsing Handel's *Messiah* the previous month for their annual Christmas pageant, and Sybil had sung her solo part, a demanding part for contralto voice, and the choir director had praised her in front of the others . . . and she'd seemed to see, dimly, a man, a stranger, seated at the very rear of the auditorium, his features distinct but his grey hair striking, and wasn't this man miming applause, clapping silently? *There. At the rear, on the aisle.* It frequently happened that visitors dropped by rehearsals—parents or relatives of choir members, colleagues of the music director. So no one took special notice of the stranger sitting unobtrusively at the rear of the auditorium. He wore dark, conservative clothes of the

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kind to attract no attention, and dark glasses hid his eyes. But there he was. *For Sybil Blake. He'd come for Sybil.* But, at the time, Sybil had not seen.

Nor had she seen the man leave. Slipping quietly out of his seat, walking with a just perceptible limp, leaning on his cane.

3. The Proposition

Sybil had no intention of seeking out Mr. Starr, nor even of looking around for him, but, the following afternoon, as she was headed home after her run, there, suddenly, the man was—taller than she recalled, looming large, his dark glasses winking in the sunlight, and his pale lips stretched in a tentative smile. He wore his clothes of the previous day except he'd set on his head a sporty plaid golfing cap that gave him a rakish, yet wistful, air, and he'd tied, as if in haste, a rumpled cream-colored silk scarf around his neck. He was standing on the path in approximately the same place as before, and leaning on his cane; on a bench close by were what appeared to be his art supplies, in a canvas duffel bag of the sort students carried. "Why, hello!" he said, shyly but eagerly, "—I didn't dare hope you would come back, but—" his smile widened as if on the verge of desperation, the puckered skin at the corners of his eyes tightened, "—I *hoped.*"

After running, Sybil always felt good: strength flowed into her legs, arms, lungs. She was a delicate-boned girl, since infancy prone to respiratory infections, but such vigorous exercise had made her strong in recent years; and with physical confidence had come a growing confidence in herself. She laughed, lightly, at this strange man's words, and merely shrugged, and said, "Well—this *is* my park, after all." Mr. Starr nodded eagerly, as if any response from her, any words at all, was of enormous interest. "Yes, yes," he said, "—I can see that. Do you live close by?"

Sybil shrugged. It was none of his business, was it, where she lived? "Maybe," she said.

"And your—name?" He stared at her, hopefully, adjusting his glasses more firmly on his nose. "—My name is Starr."

"My name is—Blake."

Mr. Starr blinked, and smiled, as if uncertain whether this might be a joke. " 'Blake'—? An unusual name for a girl," he said.

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Sybil laughed again, feeling her face heat. She decided not to correct the misunderstanding.

Today, prepared for the encounter, having anticipated it for hours, Sybil was distinctly less uneasy than she'd been the day before: the man had a business proposition to make to her, that was all. And the park *was* an open, public, safe place, as familiar to her as the small neat yard of her Aunt Lora's house.

So, when Mr. Starr repeated his offer, Sybil said, yes, she was interested after all; she did need money, she was saving for college. "For college?—really? So young?" Mr. Starr said, with an air of surprise. Sybil shrugged, as if the remark didn't require any reply. "I suppose, here in California, young people grow up quickly," Mr. Starr said. He'd gone to get his sketch-pad, to show Sybil his work, and Sybil turned the pages with polite interest, as Mr. Starr chattered. He was, he said, an "amateur artist"—the very epitome of the "amateur"—with no delusions regarding his talent, but a strong belief that the world is redeemed by art—"And the world, you know, being profane, and steeped in wickedness, requires constant, ceaseless redemption." He believed that the artist "bears witness" to this fact; and that art can be a "conduit of emotion" where the heart is empty. Sybil, leafing through the sketches, paid little attention to Mr. Starr's tumble of words; she was struck by the feathery, uncertain, somehow *worshipful* detail in the drawings, which, to her eye, were not so bad as she'd expected, though by no means of professional quality. As she looked at them, Mr. Starr came to look over her shoulder, embarrassed, and excited, his shadow falling over the pages. The ocean, the waves, the wide rippled beach as seen from the bluff—palm trees, hibiscus, flowers—a World War II memorial in the park—mothers with young children—solitary figures huddled on park benches—bicyclists—joggers—several pages of joggers: Mr. Starr's work was ordinary, even commonplace, but certainly earnest. Sybil saw herself amid the joggers, or a figure she guessed must be herself, a young girl with shoulder-length dark hair held off her face by a headband, in running pants and a sweatshirt, caught in mid-stride, legs and swinging arms caught in motion—it *was* herself, but so clumsily executed, the profile so smudged, no one would have known. Still, Sybil felt her face grow warmer, and she sensed Mr. Starr's anticipation like a withheld breath.

Sybil did not think it quite right for her, aged seventeen, to pass judgment on the talent of a middle-aged man, so she merely murmured something vague and polite and positive; and Mr. Starr, tak-

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ing the sketch pad from her, said, "Oh, I *know*—I'm not very good, yet. But I propose to try." He smiled at her, and took out a freshly laundered white handkerchief, and dabbed at his forehead, and said, "Do you have any questions about posing for me, or shall we begin?—we'll have at least three hours of daylight, today."

"Three hours!" Sybil exclaimed. "That long?"

"If you get uncomfortable," Mr. Starr said quickly, "—we'll simply stop, wherever we are." Seeing that Sybil was frowning, he added, eagerly, "We'll take breaks every now and then, I promise. And, and—" seeing that Sybil was still indecisive, "—I'll pay you for a full hour's fee, for any part of an hour." Still Sybil stood, wondering if, after all, she should be agreeing to this, without her Aunt Lora, or anyone, knowing: wasn't there something just faintly odd about Mr. Starr, and about his willingness to pay her so much for doing so little? And wasn't there something troubling (however flattering) about his particular interest in her? Assuming Sybil was correct, and he'd been watching her . . . aware of her . . . for at least a month. "I'll be happy to pay you in advance, Blake."

The name Blake sounded very odd in this stranger's mouth. Sybil had never before been called by her last name only.

Sybil laughed nervously, and said, "You don't have to pay me in advance—thanks!"

So Sybil Blake, against her better judgment, became a model, for Mr. Starr.

And, despite her self-consciousness, and her intermittent sense that there was something ludicrous in the enterprise, as about Mr. Starr's intense, fussy, self-important manner as he sketched her (he was a perfectionist, or wanted to give that impression: crumpling a half-dozen sheets of paper, breaking out new charcoal sticks, before he began a sketch that pleased him), the initial session was easy, effortless. "What I want to capture," Mr. Starr said, "—is, beyond your beautiful profile, Blake,—and you *are* a beautiful child!—the brooding quality of the ocean. That look to it, d'you see?—of it having consciousness of a kind, actually thinking. Yes, *brooding!*"

Sybil, squinting down at the white-capped waves, the rhythmic crashing surf, the occasional surfers riding their boards with their remarkable amphibian dexterity, thought that the ocean was anything but *brooding*.

"Why are you smiling, Blake?" Mr. Starr asked, pausing. "Is something funny?—am *I* funny?"

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Quickly Sybil said, "Oh, no, Mr. Starr, of course not."

"But I *am,* I'm sure," he said happily. "And if you find me so, please *do* laugh!"

Sybil found herself laughing, as if rough fingers were tickling her. She thought of how it might have been . . . had she had a father, and a mother: her own family, as she'd been meant to have.

Mr. Starr was squatting now on the grass close by and peering up at Sybil with an expression of extreme concentration. The charcoal stick in his fingers moved rapidly. "The ability to *laugh,*" he said, "is the ability to *live*—the two are synonymous. You're too young to understand that right now, but one day you will." Sybil shrugged, wiping her eyes. Mr. Starr was talking grandly. "The world is fallen and profane—the opposite of 'sacred,' you know, *is* 'profane.' It requires ceaseless vigilance—ceaseless redemption. The artist is one who redeems by restoring the world's innocence, where he can. The artist gives, but does not take away, nor even supplant."

Sybil said, skeptically, "But you want to make money with your drawings, don't you?"

Mr. Starr seemed genuinely shocked. "Oh, my, no. Adamantly, *no.*"

Sybil persisted, "Well, most people would. I mean, most people need to. If they have any talent"—she was speaking with surprising bluntness, an almost childlike audacity—"they need to sell it, somehow."

As if he'd been caught out in a crime, Mr. Starr began to stammer apologetically, "It's true, Blake, I—I am not like most people, I suppose. I've inherited some money—not a fortune, but enough to live on comfortably for the rest of my life. I've been traveling abroad," he said, vaguely, "—and, in my absence, interest accumulated."

Sybil asked doubtfully, "You don't have any regular profession?"

Mr. Starr laughed, startled. Up close, his teeth were chunky and irregular, slightly stained, like aged ivory piano keys. "But, dear child," he said, "*this* is my profession—'redeeming the world'!"

And he fell to sketching Sybil with renewed enthusiasm.

Minutes passed. Long minutes. Sybil felt a mild ache between her shoulder blades. A mild uneasiness in her chest. *Mr. Starr is mad. Is Mr. Starr 'mad'?* Behind her, on the path, people were passing by, there were joggers, bicyclists—Mr. Starr, lost in a trance of concentration, paid them not the slightest heed. Sybil wondered if anyone knew her, and was taking note of this peculiar event. Or was she, herself, making too much of it? She decided she would tell

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her Aunt Lora about Mr. Starr that evening, tell Aunt Lora frankly how much he was paying her. She both respected and feared her aunt's judgment: in Sybil's imagination, in that unexamined sphere of being we call the imagination, Lora Dell Blake had acquired the authority of both Sybil's deceased parents.

Yes, she would tell Aunt Lora.

After only an hour and forty minutes, when Sybil appeared to be growing restless and sighed several times, unconsciously, Mr. Starr suddenly declared the session over. He had, he said, three promising sketches, and he didn't want to exhaust her, or himself. She *was* coming back tomorrow—?

"I don't know," Sybil said. "Maybe."

Sybil protested, though not very adamantly, when Mr. Starr paid her the full amount, for three hours' modeling. He paid her in cash, out of his wallet—an expensive kidskin wallet brimming with bills. Sybil thanked him, deeply embarrassed, and eager to escape. Oh, there *was* something shameful about the transaction!

Up close, she was able—almost—to see Mr. Starr's eyes through the dark-tinted lenses of his glasses. Some delicacy of tact made her glance away quickly but she had an impression of kindness—gentleness.

Sybil took the money, and put it in her pocket, and turned, to hurry away. With no mind for who might hear him, Mr. Starr called after her, "You see, Blake?—Starr is true to his word. Always!"

4. Is the Omission of Truth a Lie, or Only an Omission?

"Well!—tell me how things went with *you* today, Sybil!" Lora Dell Blake said, with such an air of bemused exasperation, Sybil understood that, as so often, Aunt Lora had something to say that really couldn't wait—her work at the Glencoe Medical Center provided her with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of comical and outrageous anecdotes. So, deferring to Aunt Lora, as they prepared supper together as usual, and sat down to eat it, Sybil was content to listen, and to laugh.

For it *was* funny, if outrageous too—the latest episode in the ongoing folly at the Medical Center.

Lora Dell Blake, in her late forties, was a tall, lanky, restless woman; with close-cropped greying hair; sand-colored eyes and skin; a generous spirit, but a habit of sarcasm. Though she claimed to

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love Southern California—"You don't know what paradise is, unless you're from somewhere else"—she seemed in fact an awkwardly transplanted New Englander, with expectations and a sense of personal integrity, or intransigence, quite out of place here. She was fond of saying she did not suffer fools gladly, and so it was. Overqualified for her position at the Glencoe Medical Center, she'd had no luck in finding work elsewhere, partly because she did not want to leave Glencoe and "uproot" Sybil while Sybil was still in high school; and partly because her interviews were invariably disasters—Lora Dell Blake was incapable of being, or even seeming, docile, tractable, "feminine," hypocritical.

Lora was not Sybil's sole living relative—there were Blakes, and Contes, back in Vermont—but Lora had discouraged visitors to the small stucco bungalow on Meridian Street, in Glencoe, California; she had not in fact troubled to reply to letters or cards since, having been granted custody of her younger sister's daughter, at the time of what she called "the tragedy," she'd picked up and moved across the continent, to a part of the country she knew nothing about—"My intention is to erase the past, for the child's sake," she said, "and to start a new life."

And: "For the child, for poor little Sybil—I would make any sacrifice."

Sybil, who loved her aunt very much, had the vague idea that there had been, many years ago, protests, queries, telephone calls—but that Aunt Lora had dealt with them all, and really had made a new and "uncomplicated" life for them. Aunt Lora was one of those personalities, already strong, that is strengthened, and empowered, by being challenged; she seemed to take an actual zest in confrontation, whether with her own relatives or her employers at the Medical Center—anyone who presumed to tell her what to do. She was especially protective of Sybil, since, as she often said, they had no one but each other.

Which was true. Aunt Lora had seen to that.

Though Sybil had been adopted by her aunt, there was never any pretense that she was anything but Lora's niece, not her daughter. Nor did most people, seeing the two together, noting their physical dissimilarities, make that mistake.

So it happened that Sybil Blake grew up knowing virtually nothing about her Vermont background except its general tragic outline: her knowledge of her mother and father, the precise circumstances of their deaths, was as vague and unexamined in her consciousness

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as a childhood fairy tale. For whenever, as a little girl, Sybil would ask her aunt about these things, Aunt Lora responded with hurt, or alarm, or reproach, or, most disturbingly, anxiety. Her eyes might flood with tears—Aunt Lora, who never cried. She might take Sybil's hands in both her own, and squeeze them tightly, and looking Sybil in the eyes, say, in a quiet, commanding voice, "But, darling, *you don't want to know.*"

So too, that evening, when, for some reason, Sybil brought up the subject, asking Aunt Lora how, again, exactly, *had* her parents died, Aunt Lora looked at her in surprise; and, for a long moment, rummaging in the pockets of her shirt for a pack of cigarettes that wasn't there (Aunt Lora had given up smoking the previous month, for perhaps the fifth time), it seemed almost that Lora herself did not remember.

"Sybil, honey—why are you asking? I mean, why *now?*"

"I don't know," Sybil said evasively. "I guess—I'm just asking."

"Nothing happened to you at school, did it?"

Sybil could not see how this question related to her own, but she said, politely, "No, Aunt Lora. Of course not."

"It's just that out of nowhere—I can't help but wonder *why,*" Aunt Lora said, frowning, "—you should ask."

Aunt Lora regarded Sybil with worried eyes: a look of such suffocating familiarity that, for a moment, Sybil felt as if a band were tightening around her chest, making it impossible to breathe. *Why is my wanting to know a test of my love for you?—why do you do this, Aunt Lora, every time?* She said, an edge of anger to her voice, "I was seventeen years old last week, Aunt Lora. I'm not a child any longer."

Aunt Lora laughed, startled. "Certainly you're not a child!"

Aunt Lora then sighed, and, in a characteristic gesture, meaning both impatience and a dutiful desire to please, ran both hands rapidly through her hair and began to speak. She assured Sybil that there was little to know, really. The accident—the tragedy—had happened so long ago. "Your mother, Melanie, was twenty-six years old at the time—a beautiful sweet-natured young woman, with eyes like yours, cheekbones like yours, pale wavy hair. Your father, George Conte, was thirty-one years old—a promising young lawyer, in his father's firm—an attractive, ambitious man—" And here as in the past Aunt Lora paused, as if in the very act of summoning up this long-dead couple, she had forgotten them; and was simply

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repeating a story, a family tale, like one of the more extreme of her tales of the Glencoe Medical Center, worn smooth by countless tellings.

"A boating accident—Fourth of July—" Sybil coaxed, "—and I was with you, and—"

"You were with me, and Grandma, at the cottage—you were just a little girl!" Aunt Lora said, blinking tears from her eyes, "—and it was almost dusk, and time for the fireworks to start. Mommy and Daddy were out in Daddy's speedboat—they'd been across the lake, at the Club—"

"And they started back across the lake—Lake Champlain—"

"—Lake Champlain, of course: it's beautiful, but treacherous, if a storm comes up suddenly—"

"And Daddy was at the controls of the boat—"

"—and, somehow, they capsized. And drowned. A rescue boat went out immediately, but it was too late." Aunt Lora's mouth turned hard. Her eyes glistening with tears, as if defiantly. "They drowned."

Sybil's heart was beating painfully. She was certain there must be more, yet she herself could remember nothing—not even herself, that two-year-old child, waiting for Mommy and Daddy who were never to arrive. Her memory of her mother and father was vague, dim, featureless, like a dream that, even as it seems about to drift into consciousness, retreats farther into darkness. She said, in a whisper, "It was an accident. No one was to blame."

Aunt Lora chose her words with care. "No one was to blame."

There was a pause. Sybil looked at her aunt, who was not now looking at her. How lined, even leathery, the older woman's face was getting!—all her life she'd been reckless, indifferent, about sun, wind, weather, and now, in her late forties, she might have been a decade older. Sybil said, tentatively, "No one *was* to blame—?"

"Well, if you must know," Aunt Lora said, "—there was evidence he'd been drinking. They'd been drinking. At the Club."

Sybil could not have been more shocked had Aunt Lora reached over and pinched the back of her hand. "Drinking—?" She had never heard this part of the story before.

Aunt Lora continued, grimly, "But not enough, probably, to have made a difference." Again she paused. She was not looking at Sybil. "Probably."

Sybil, stunned, could not think of anything further to say, or to ask.

Aunt Lora was on her feet, pacing. Her close-cropped hair was

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disheveled and her manner fiercely contentious, as if she were arguing her case before an invisible audience as Sybil looked on. "What fools! I tried to tell her! 'Popular' couple—'attractive' couple—lots of friends—too many friends! That Goddamned Champlain Club, where everyone drank too much! All that money, and privilege! And what good did it do! She—Melanie—so proud of being asked to join—proud of marrying *him*—throwing her life away! That's what it came to, in the end. I'd warned her it was dangerous—playing with fire—but would she listen? Would either of them listen? To Lora?—to *me?* When you're that age, so ignorant, you think you will live forever—you can throw your life away—"

Sybil felt ill, suddenly. She walked swiftly out of the room, shut the door to her own room, stood in the dark, beginning to cry.

So that was it, the secret. The tawdry little secret—drinking, drunkenness—behind the "tragedy."

With characteristic tact, Aunt Lora did not knock on Sybil's door, but left her alone for the remainder of the night.

Only after Sybil was in bed, and the house darkened, did she realize she'd forgotten to tell her aunt about Mr. Starr—he'd slipped her mind entirely. And the money he'd pressed into her hand, now in her bureau drawer, rolled up neatly beneath her underwear, as if hidden. . . .

Sybil thought, guiltily, I can tell her tomorrow.

5. The Hearse

Crouched in front of Sybil Blake, eagerly sketching her likeness, Mr. Starr was saying, in a quick, rapturous voice, "Yes, yes, like that!—yes! Your face uplifted to the sun like a blossoming flower! Just so!" And: "There are only two or three eternal questions, Blake, which, like the surf, repeat themselves endlessly: 'Why are we here?'—'Where have we come from, and where are we going?'—'Is there purpose to the Universe, or merely chance?' These questions the artist seems to express in the images he knows." And: "Dear child, I wish you would tell me about yourself. Just a little!"

As if, in the night, some changes had come upon her, some new resolve, Sybil had fewer misgivings about modeling for Mr. Starr this afternoon. It was as if they knew each other well, somehow: Sybil was reasonably certain that Mr. Starr was not a sexual per-

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vert, nor even a madman of a more conventional sort; she'd glimpsed his sketches of her, which were fussy, overworked, and smudged, but not bad as likenesses. The man's murmurous chatter was comforting in a way, hypnotic as the surf, no longer quite so embarrassing—for he talked, most of the time, not with her but at her, and there was no need to reply. In a way, Mr. Starr reminded Sybil of her Aunt Lora, when she launched into one of her comical anecdotes about the Glencoe Medical Center. Aunt Lora was more entertaining than Mr. Starr, but Mr. Starr was more idealistic.

His optimism was simpleminded, maybe. But it *was* optimistic.

For this second modeling session, Mr. Starr had taken Sybil to a corner of the park where they were unlikely to be disturbed. He'd asked her to remove her headband, and to sit on a bench with her head dropping back, her eyes partly shut, her face uplifted to the sun—an uncomfortable pose at first, until, lulled by the crashing surf below, and Mr. Starr's monologue, Sybil began to feel oddly peaceful, floating.

Yes, in the night some change had come upon her. She could not comprehend its dimensions, nor even its tone. She'd fallen asleep crying bitterly but had awakened feeling—what? Vulnerable, somehow. And wanting to be so. *Uplifted. Like a blossoming flower.*

That morning, Sybil had forgotten another time to tell her Aunt Lora about Mr. Starr, and the money she was making—such a generous amount, and for so little effort! She shrank from considering how her aunt might respond, for her aunt was mistrustful of strangers, and particularly of men. . . . Sybil reasoned that, when she did tell Aunt Lora, that evening, or tomorrow morning, she would make her understand that there was something kindly and trusting and almost childlike about Mr. Starr. You could laugh at him, but laughter was somehow inappropriate.

As if, though middle-aged, he had been away somewhere, sequestered, protected, out of the adult world. Innocent and, himself, vulnerable.

Today too he'd eagerly offered to pay Sybil in advance for modeling, and, another time, Sybil had declined. She would not have wanted to tell Mr. Starr that, were she paid in advance, she might be tempted to cut the session even shorter than otherwise.

Mr. Starr was saying, hesitantly, "Blake?—can you tell me about—" and here he paused, as if drawing a random, inspired notion out of nowhere "—your mother?"

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Sybil hadn't been paying close attention to Mr. Starr. Now she opened her eyes and looked directly at him.

Mr. Starr was perhaps not so old as she'd originally thought, nor as old as he behaved. His face was a handsome face, but oddly roughened—the skin like sandpaper. Very sallow, sickly pale. A faint scar on his forehead above his left eye, the shape of a fish hook, or a question mark. Or was it a birthmark?—or, even less romantically, some sort of skin blemish? Maybe his roughened, pitted skin was the result of teenaged acne, nothing more.

His tentative smile bared chunky damp teeth.

Today Mr. Starr was bareheaded, and his thin, fine, uncannily silver hair was stirred by the wind. He wore plain, nondescript clothes, a shirt too large for him, a khaki-colored jacket or smock with rolled-up sleeves. At close range, Sybil could see his eyes through the tinted lenses of his glasses: they were small, deep-set, intelligent, glistening. The skin beneath was pouched and shadowed, as if bruised.

Sybil shivered, peering so directly into Mr. Starr's eyes. As into another's soul, when she was unprepared.

Sybil swallowed, and said, slowly, "My mother is . . . not living."

A curious way of speaking!—for why not say, candidly, in normal usage, *My mother is dead.*

For a long painful moment Sybil's words hovered in the air between them; as if Mr. Starr, discountenanced by his own blunder, seemed not to want to hear.

He said, quickly, apologetically, "Oh—I see. I'm sorry."

Sybil had been posing in the sun, warmly mesmerized by the sun, the surf, Mr. Starr's voice, and now, as if wakened from a sleep of which she had not been conscious, she felt as if she'd been touched—prodded into wakefulness. She saw, upside-down, the fussy smudged sketch Mr. Starr had been doing of her, saw his charcoal stick poised above the stiff white paper in an attitude of chagrin. She laughed, and wiped at her eyes, and said, "It happened a long time ago. I never think of it, really."

Mr. Starr's expression was wary, complex. He asked, "And so—do you—live with your—father?" The words seemed oddly forced.

"No, I don't. And I don't want to talk about this any more, Mr. Starr, if it's all right with you."

Sybil spoke pleadingly, yet with an air of finality.

"Then—we won't! We won't! We certainly won't!" Mr. Starr said quickly. And fell to sketching again, his face creased in concentration.

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And so the remainder of the session passed in silence.

Again, as soon as Sybil evinced signs of restlessness, Mr. Starr declared she could stop for the day—he didn't want to exhaust her, or himself.

Sybil rubbed her neck, which ached mildly; she stretched her arms, her legs. Her skin felt slightly sun- or wind-burnt and her eyes felt seared, as if she'd been staring directly into the sun. Or had she been crying?—she couldn't remember.

Again, Mr. Starr paid Sybil in cash, out of his kidskin wallet brimming with bills. His hand shook just visibly as he pressed the money into Sybil's. (Embarrassed, Sybil folded the bills quickly and put them in her pocket. Later, at home, she would discover that Mr. Starr had given her ten dollars too much: a bonus, for almost making her cry?) Though it was clear that Sybil was eager to get away, Mr. Starr walked with her up the slope in the direction of the Boulevard, limping, leaning on his cane, but keeping a brisk pace. He asked if Sybil—of course, he called her Blake: "dear Blake"—would like to have some refreshment with him in a café nearby?—and when Sybil declined, murmured, "Yes, yes, I understand—I suppose." He then asked if Sybil would return the following day, and when Sybil did not say no, added that, if she did, he would like to increase her hourly fee in exchange for asking of her a slightly different sort of modeling—"A slightly modified sort of modeling, here in the park, or perhaps down on the beach, in full daylight of course, as before, and yet, in its way—" Mr. Starr paused nervously, seeking the right word, "—experimental."

Sybil asked doubtfully, " 'Experimental'—?"

"I'm prepared to increase your fee, Blake, by half."

"What kind of 'experimental'?"

"Emotion."

"What?"

"Emotion. Memory. Interiority."

Now that they were emerging from the park, and more likely to be seen, Sybil was glancing uneasily about: she dreaded seeing someone from school, or, worse yet, a friend of her aunt's. Mr. Starr gestured as he spoke, and seemed more than ordinarily excited. "—'Interiority.' That which is hidden to the outer eye. I'll tell you in more detail tomorrow, Blake," he said. "You *will* meet me here tomorrow?"

Sybil murmured, "I don't know, Mr. Starr."

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"Oh, but you must!—please."

Sybil felt a tug of sympathy for Mr. Starr. He *was* kind, and courteous, and gentlemanly; and, certainly, very generous. She could not imagine his life except to see him as a lonely, eccentric man without friends. Uncomfortable as she was in his presence, she yet wondered if perhaps she was exaggerating his eccentricity: what would a neutral observer make of the tall limping figure, the cane, the canvas duffel bag, the polished black leather shoes that reminded her of a funeral, the fine thin beautiful silver hair, the dark glasses that winked in the sunshine . . . ? Would such an observer, seeing Sybil Blake and Mr. Starr together, give them a second glance?

"Look," Sybil said, pointing, "—a hearse."

At a curb close by there was a long sleekly black car with dark-tinted, impenetrable windows. Mr. Starr laughed, and said, embarrassed, "I'm afraid, Blake, that isn't a hearse, you know—it's my car."

"Your car?"

"Yes. I'm afraid so."

Now Sybil could see that the vehicle was a limousine, idling at the curb. Behind the wheel was a youngish driver with a visored cap on his head; in profile, he appeared Oriental. Sybil stared, amazed. So Mr. Starr was wealthy, indeed.

He was saying, apologetically, yet with a kind of boyish pleasure, "I don't drive, myself, you see!—a further handicap. I did, once, long ago, but—circumstances intervened." Sybil was thinking that she often saw chauffeur-driven limousines in Glencoe, but she'd never known anyone who owned one before. Mr. Starr said, "Blake, may I give you a ride home?—I'd be delighted, of course."

Sybil laughed, as if she'd been tickled, hard, in the ribs.

"A ride? In that?" she asked.

"No trouble! Absolutely!" Mr. Starr limped to the rear door and opened it with a flourish, before the driver could get out to open it for him. He squinted back at Sybil, smiling hopefully. "It's the least I can do for you, after our exhausting session."

Sybil was smiling, staring into the shadowy interior of the car. The uniformed driver had climbed out, and stood, not quite knowing what to do, watching. He was a Filipino, perhaps, not young after all but with a small, wizened face; he wore white gloves. He stood very straight and silent, watching Sybil.

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There was a moment when it seemed, yes, Sybil was going to accept Mr. Starr's offer, and climb into the rear of the long sleekly black limousine, so that Mr. Starr could climb in behind her, and shut the door upon them both; but, then, for some reason she could not have named—it might have been the smiling intensity with which Mr. Starr was looking at her, or the rigid posture of the white-gloved driver—she changed her mind and called out, "No thanks!"

Mr. Starr was disappointed, and Mr. Starr was hurt—you could see it in his downturned mouth. But he said, cheerfully, "Oh, I quite understand, Blake—I *am* a stranger, after all. It's better to be prudent, of course. But, my dear, I *will* see you tomorrow—?"

Sybil shouted, "Maybe!" and ran across the street.

6. The Face

She stayed away from the park. *Because I want to, because I can.*

Thursday, in any case, was her voice lesson after school. Friday, choir rehearsal; then an evening with friends. On Saturday morning she went jogging, not in the oceanside park but in another park, miles away, where Mr. Starr could not have known to look for her. And, on Sunday, Aunt Lora drove them to Los Angeles for a belated birthday celebration, for Sybil—an art exhibit, a dinner, a play.

So, you see, I can do it. I don't need your money, or you.

Since the evening when Aunt Lora had told Sybil about her parents' boating accident—that it might have been caused by drinking—neither Sybil nor her aunt had cared to bring up the subject again. Sybil shuddered to think of it. She felt properly chastised, for her curiosity.

Why do you want to know?—you will only make yourself cry.

Sybil had never gotten around to telling Aunt Lora about Mr. Starr, nor about her modeling. Even during their long Sunday together. Not a word about her cache of money, hidden away in a bureau drawer.

Money for what?—for summer school, for college.

For the future.

Aunt Lora was not the sort of person to spy on a member of her household but she observed Sybil closely, with her trained clinician's eye. "Sybil, you've been very quiet lately—there's nothing wrong, I

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hope?" she asked, and Sybil said quickly, nervously, "Oh, no! What could be wrong?"

She was feeling guilty about keeping a secret from Aunt Lora, and she was feeling quite guilty about staying away from Mr. Starr.

Two adults. Like twin poles. Of course, Mr. Starr was really a stranger—he did not exist in Sybil Blake's life, at all. Why did it feel to her, so strangely, that he did?

Days passed, and instead of forgetting Mr. Starr, and strengthening her resolve not to model for him, Sybil seemed to see the man, in her mind's eye, ever more clearly. She could not understand why he seemed attracted to her, she was convinced it was not a sexual attraction but something purer, more spiritual, and yet—why? Why *her?*

Why had he visited her high school, and sat in upon a choir rehearsal? Had he known she would be there?—or was it simply accident?

She shuddered to think of what Aunt Lora would make of this, if she knew. If news of Mr. Starr got back to her.

Mr. Starr's face floated before her. Its pallor, its sorrow. That look of convalescence. Waiting. The dark glasses. The hopeful smile. One night, waking from a particularly vivid, disturbing dream, Sybil thought for a confused moment that she'd seen Mr. Starr in the room—it hadn't been just a dream! How wounded he looked, puzzled, hurt. *Come with me, Sybil. Hurry. Now. It's been so long.* He'd been waiting for her in the park for days, limping, the duffel bag slung over his shoulder, glancing up hopefully at every passing stranger.

Behind him, the elegantly gleaming black limousine, larger than Sybil remembered; and driverless.

Sybil?—Sybil? Mr. Starr called, impatiently.

As if, all along, he'd known her real name. And she had known he'd known.

7. The Experiment

So, Monday afternoon, Sybil Blake found herself back in the park, modeling for Mr. Starr.

Seeing him in the park, so obviously awaiting her, Sybil had felt almost apologetic. Not that he greeted her with any measure of reproach (though his face was drawn and sallow, as if he hadn't been sleeping well), nor even questioned her mutely with his eyes *Where*

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have you been? Certainly not! He smiled happily when he saw her, limping in her direction like a doting father, seemingly determined not to acknowledge her absence of the past four days. Sybil called out, "Hello, Mr. Starr!" and felt, yes, so strangely, as if things were once again right.

"How lovely!—and the day is so fine!—'in full daylight'—as I promised!" Mr. Starr cried.

Sybil had been jogging for forty minutes, and felt very good, strengthened. She removed her damp yellow headband and stuffed it in her pocket. When Mr. Starr repeated the terms of his proposition of the previous week, restating the higher fee, Sybil agreed at once, for of course that was why she'd come. How, in all reasonableness, could she resist?

Mr. Starr took some time before deciding upon a place for Sybil to pose—"It must be ideal, a synthesis of poetry and practicality." Finally, he chose a partly crumbling stone ledge overlooking the beach in a remote corner of the park. He asked Sybil to lean against the ledge, gazing out at the ocean. Her hands pressed flat against the top of the ledge, her head uplifted as much as possible, within comfort. "But today, dear Blake, I am going to record not just the surface likeness of a lovely young girl," he said, "—but *memory,* and *emotion*, coursing through her."

Sybil took the position readily enough. So invigorated did she feel from her exercise, and so happy to be back again in her role as model, she smiled out at the ocean as at an old friend. "What kind of memory and emotion, Mr. Starr?" she asked.

Mr. Starr eagerly took up his sketch pad and a fresh stick of charcoal. It was a mild day, the sky placid and featureless, though, up the coast, in the direction of Big Sur, massive thunderclouds were gathering. The surf was high, the waves powerful, hypnotic. One hundred yards below, young men in surfing gear, carrying their boards lightly as if they were made of papier-mâché, prepared to enter the water.

Mr. Starr cleared his throat, and said, almost shyly, "Your mother, dear Blake. Tell me all you know—all you can remember—about your mother."

"My mother?"

Sybil winced and would have broken her position, except Mr. Starr put out a quick hand, to steady her. It was the first time he had touched her in quite that way. He said gently, "I realize it's a painful subject, Blake, but—will you try?"

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Sybil said, "No. I don't want to."

"You won't, then?"

"I *can't.*"

"But why can't you, dear?—any memory of your mother would do."

"No."

Sybil saw that Mr. Starr was quickly sketching her, or trying to—his hand shook. She wanted to reach out to snatch the charcoal stick from him and snap it in two. How dare he! God damn him!

"Yes, yes," Mr. Starr said hurriedly, an odd, elated look on his face, as if, studying her so intently, he was not seeing her at all, "—yes, dear, like that. Any memory—any! So long as it's yours."

Sybil said, "Whose else would it be?" She laughed, and was surprised that her laughter sounded like sobbing.

"Why, many times innocent children are given memories by adults; contaminated by memories not their own," Mr. Starr said somberly. "In which case the memory is spurious. Inauthentic."

Sybil saw her likeness on the sheet of stiff white paper, upside-down. There was something repulsive about it. Though she was wearing her usual jogging clothes (a shirt, running pants) Mr. Starr made it look as if she were wearing a clinging, flowing gown; or, maybe, nothing at all. Where her small breasts would have been were swirls and smudges of charcoal, as if she were on the brink of dissolution. Her face and head were vividly drawn, but rather raw, crude, and exposed.

She saw too that Mr. Starr's silver hair had a flat metallic sheen this afternoon; and his beard was faintly visible, metallic too, glinting on his jaws. He was stronger than she'd thought. He had knowledge far beyond hers.

Sybil resumed her position. She stared out at the ocean—the tall, cresting, splendidly white-capped waves. Why was she here, what did this man want out of her? She worried suddenly that, whatever it was, she could not provide it.

But Mr. Starr was saying, in his gentle, murmurous voice, "There are people—primarily women!—who are what I call 'conduits of emotion.' In their company, the half-dead can come alive. They need not be beautiful women or girls. It's a matter of blood-warmth. The integrity of the spirit." He turned the page of his sketch pad, and began anew, whistling thinly through his teeth. "Thus an icy-cold soul, in the presence of one so blessed, can regain something of his lost self. Sometimes!"

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Sybil tried to summon forth a memory, an image at least, of her mother. *Melanie. Twenty-six at the time. Eyes . . . cheekbones . . . pale wavy hair.* A ghostly face appeared but faded almost at once. Sybil sobbed involuntarily. Her eyes stung with tears.

"—sensed that you, dear Blake—*is* your name Blake, really?—are one of these. A 'conduit of emotion'—of finer, higher things. Yes, yes! My intuition rarely misguides me!" Mr. Starr spoke as, hurriedly, excitedly, he sketched Sybil's likeness. He was squatting close beside her, on his haunches; his dark glasses winked in the sun. Sybil knew, should she glance at him, she would not be able to see his eyes.

Mr. Starr said, coaxingly, "Don't you remember anything—at all—about your mother?"

Sybil shook her head, meaning she didn't want to speak.

"Her name. Surely you know her name?"

Sybil whispered, "Mommy."

"Ah, yes: 'Mommy.' To you, that would have been her name."

"Mommy—went away. They told me—"

"Yes? Please continue!"

"—Mommy was gone. And Daddy. On the lake—"

"Lake? Where?"

"Lake Champlain. In Vermont, and New York, Aunt Lora says—"

" 'Aunt Lora'—?"

"Mommy's sister. She was older. Is older. She took me away. She adopted me. She—"

"And is 'Aunt Lora' married?"

"No. There's just her and me."

"What happened on the lake?"

"—it happened in the boat, on the lake. Daddy was driving the boat, they said. He came for me too but—I don't know if that was that time or some other time. I've been told, but I don't *know.*"

Tears were streaming down Sybil's face now; she could not maintain her composure. But she managed to keep from hiding her face in her hands. She could hear Mr. Starr's quickened breath, and she could hear the rasping sound of the charcoal against the paper.

Mr. Starr said gently, "You must have been a little girl when—whatever it was—happened."

"I wasn't little to *myself.* I just *was.*"

"A long time ago, was it?"

"Yes. No. It's always—there."

"Always where, dear child?"

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"Where I, I—see it."

"See what?"

"I—don't *know*."

"Do you see your mommy? Was she a beautiful woman?—did she resemble you?"

"Leave me alone—I don't *know*."

Sybil began to cry. Mr. Starr, repentant, or wary, went immediately silent.

Someone—it must have been bicyclists—passed behind them, and Sybil was aware of being observed, no doubt quizzically: a girl leaning forward across a stone ledge, face wet with tears, and a middle-aged man on his haunches busily sketching her. An artist and his model. An amateur artist, an amateur model. But how strange, that the girl was crying! And the man so avidly recording her tears!

Sybil, eyes closed, felt herself indeed a conduit of emotion—she *was* emotion. She stood upon the ground but she floated free. Mr. Starr was close beside her, anchoring her, but she floated free. A veil was drawn aside, and she saw a face—Mommy's face—a pretty heart-shaped face—something both affectionate and petulant in that face—how young Mommy was!—and her hair up, brown-blond lovely hair, tied back in a green silk scarf. Mommy hurried to the phone as it rang, Mommy lifted the receiver. Yes? yes? oh hel*lo*—for the phone was always ringing, and Mommy was always hurrying to answer it, and there was always that expectant note to her voice, that sound of hope, surprise—Oh, hel*lo*.

Sybil could no longer maintain her pose. She said, "Mr. Starr, I am through for the day, I am *sorry*." And, as the startled man looked after her, she walked away. He began to call after her, to remind her that he hadn't paid her, but, no, Sybil had had enough of modeling for the day. She broke into a run, she escaped.

8. A Long Time Ago . . .

A girl who'd married too young: was that it?

That heart-shaped face, the petulant pursed lips. The eyes widened in mock-surprise: Oh, Sybil, what have you *done* . . .?

Stooping to kiss little Sybil, little Sybil giggling with pleasure and excitement, lifting her chubby baby arms to be raised in Mommy's and carried in to bed.

Oh honey, you're too big for that now. Too heavy!

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Perfume wafting from her hair, loose to her shoulders, pale golden-brown, wavy. A rope of pearls around her neck. A low-cut summer dress, a bright floral print, like wallpaper. Mommy!

And Daddy, where *was* Daddy?

He was gone, then he was back. He'd come to her, little Sybil, to take her in the boat, the motor was loud, whining, angry as a bee buzzing and darting around her head, so Sybil was crying, and someone came, and Daddy went away again. She'd heard the motor rising, then fading. The churning of the water she couldn't see from where she stood, and it was night too, but she wasn't crying and no one scolded.

She could remember Mommy's face, though they never let her see it again. She couldn't remember Daddy's face.

Grandma said, You'll be all right, poor little darling, you'll be all right, and Aunt Lora too, hugging her tight, Forever now you'll be all right, Aunt Lora promised. It was scary to see Aunt Lora crying: Aunt Lora never cried, did she?

Lifting little Sybil in her strong arms to carry her in to bed but it wasn't the same. It would never be the same again.

9. The Gift

Sybil is standing at the edge of the ocean.

The surf crashes and pounds about her . . . water streams up the sand, nearly wetting her feet. What a tumult of cries, hidden within the waves! She feels like laughing, for no reason. *You know the reason: he has returned to you.*

The beach is wide, clean, stark, as if swept with a giant broom. A landscape of dreamlike simplicity. Sybil has seen it numberless times but today its beauty strikes her as new. *Your father: your father they told you was gone forever: he has returned to you.* The sun is a winter sun, but warm, dazzling. Poised in the sky as if about to rapidly descend. Dark comes early because, after all, it is winter here, despite the warmth. The temperature will drop twenty degrees in a half-hour. *He never died: he has been waiting for you all these years. And now he has returned.*

Sybil begins to cry. Hiding her face, her burning face, in her hands. She stands flatfooted as a little girl and the surf breaks and splashes around her and now her shoes are wet, her feet, she'll be shivering in the gathering chill. *Oh, Sybil!*

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* * *

When Sybil turned, it was to see Mr. Starr sitting on the beach. He seemed to have lost his balance and fallen—his cane lay at his feet, he'd dropped the sketch pad, his sporty golfing cap sat crooked on his head. Sybil, concerned, asked what was wrong,—she prayed he hadn't had a heart attack!—and Mr. Starr smiled weakly and told her quickly that he didn't know, he'd become dizzy, felt the strength go out of his legs, and had had to sit. "I was overcome suddenly, I think, by your emotion!—whatever it was," he said. He made no effort to get to his feet but sat there awkwardly, damp sand on his trousers and shoes. Now Sybil stood over him and he squinted up at her, and there passed between them a current of—was it understanding? sympathy? recognition?

Sybil laughed to dispel the moment and put out her hand for Mr. Starr to take, so that she could help him stand. He laughed too, though he was deeply moved, and embarrassed. "I'm afraid I make too much of things, don't I?" he said. Sybil tugged at his hand (how big his hand was! how strong the fingers, closing about hers!) and, as he heaved himself to his feet, grunting, she felt the startling weight of him—an adult man, and heavy.

Mr. Starr was standing close to Sybil, not yet relinquishing her hand. He said, "The experiment was almost too successful, from my perspective! I'm almost afraid to try again."

Sybil smiled uncertainly up at him. He was about the age her own father would have been—wasn't he? It seemed to her that a younger face was pushing out through Mr. Starr's coarse, sallow face. The hooklike quizzical scar on his forehead glistened oddly in the sun.

Sybil politely withdrew her hand from Mr. Starr's and dropped her eyes. She was shivering—today, she had not been running at all, had come to meet Mr. Starr for purposes of modeling, in a blouse and skirt, as he'd requested. She was bare-legged and her feet, in sandals, were wet from the surf.

Sybil said, softly, as if she didn't want to be heard, "I feel the same way, Mr. Starr."

They climbed a flight of wooden steps to the top of the bluff, and there was Mr. Starr's limousine, blackly gleaming, parked a short distance away. At this hour of the afternoon the park was well populated; there was a gay giggling bevy of high school girls strolling by, but Sybil took no notice. She was agitated, still; weak from crying, yet oddly strengthened, elated too. *You know who he is. You always knew.* She was keenly aware of Mr. Starr limping beside her,

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and impatient with his chatter. Why didn't he speak directly to her, for once?

The uniformed chauffeur sat behind the wheel of the limousine, looking neither to the right nor the left, as if at attention. His visored cap, his white gloves. His profile like a profile on an ancient coin. Sybil wondered if the chauffeur knew about her—if Mr. Starr talked to him about her. Suddenly she was filled with excitement, that someone else should *know*.

Mr. Starr was saying that, since Sybil had modeled so patiently that day, since she'd more than fulfilled his expectations, he had a gift for her—"In addition to your fee, that is."

He opened the rear door of the limousine, and took out a square white box, and, smiling shyly, presented it to Sybil. "Oh, what *is* it?" Sybil cried. She and Aunt Lora rarely exchanged presents any longer, it seemed like a ritual out of the deep past, delightful to rediscover. She lifted the cover of the box, and saw, inside, a beautiful purse; an over-the-shoulder bag; kidskin, the hue of rich dark honey. "Oh, Mr. Starr—thank you," Sybil said, taking the bag in her hands. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." "Why don't you open it, dear?" Mr. Starr urged, so Sybil opened the bag, and discovered money inside—fresh-minted bills—the denomination on top was twenty dollars. "I hope you didn't overpay me again," Sybil said, uneasily, "—I never have modeled for three hours yet. It isn't fair." Mr. Starr laughed, flushed with pleasure. "Fair to whom?" he asked. "What is 'fair'?—*we* do what *we* like."

Sybil raised her eyes shyly to Mr. Starr's and saw that he was looking at her intently—at least, the skin at the corners of his eyes was tightly puckered. "Today, dear, I insist upon driving you home," he said, smiling. There was a new authority in his voice that seemed to have something to do with the gift Sybil had received from him. "It will soon be getting chilly, and your feet are wet." Sybil hesitated. She had lifted the bag to her face, to inhale the pungent kidskin smell: the bag was of a quality she'd never owned before. Mr. Starr glanced swiftly about, as if to see if anyone was watching; he was still smiling. "Please do climb inside, Blake!—you can't consider me a stranger, now."

Still, Sybil hesitated. Half teasing, she said, "*You* know my name isn't Blake, don't you, Mr. Starr?—how do you know?"

Mr. Starr laughed, teasing too. "*Isn't* it? What is your name, then?"

"Don't you know?"

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"Should I know?"

"Shouldn't you?"

There was a pause. Mr. Starr had taken hold of Sybil's wrist; lightly, yet firmly. His fingers circled her thin wrists with the subtle pressure of a watchband.

Mr. Starr leaned close, as if sharing a secret. "Well, I did hear you sing your solo, in your wonderful Christmas pageant at the high school! I must confess, I'd sneaked into a rehearsal too—no one questioned my presence. And I believe I heard the choir director call you—is it 'Sybil'?"

Hearing her name in Mr. Starr's mouth, Sybil felt a sensation of vertigo. She could only nod, mutely, yes.

"*Is* it?—I wasn't sure if I'd heard correctly. A lovely name, for a lovely girl. And 'Blake'—is 'Blake' your surname?"

Sybil murmured, "Yes."

"Your father's name?"

"No. Not my father's name."

"Oh, and why not? Usually, you know, that's the case."

"Because—" And here Sybil paused, confused, uncertain what to say. "It's my mother's name. Was."

"Ah, really! I see," Mr. Starr laughed. "Well, truly, I suppose I *don't,* but we can discuss it another time. Shall we—?"

He meant, shall we get into the car; he was exerting pressure on Sybil's wrist, and, though kindly as always, seemed on the edge of impatience. Sybil stood flatfooted on the sidewalk, wanting to acquiesce; yet, at the same time, uneasily thinking that, no, she should not. Not yet.

So Sybil pulled away, laughing nervously, and Mr. Starr had to release her, with a disappointed downturning of his mouth. Sybil thanked him, saying she preferred to walk. "I hope I will see you tomorrow, then?—'Sybil'?" Mr. Starr called after her. "Yes?"

But Sybil, hugging her new bag against her chest, as a small child might hug a stuffed animal, was walking quickly away.

Was the black limousine following her, at a discreet distance?

Sybil felt a powerful compulsion to look back, but did not.

She was trying to recall if, ever in her life, she'd ridden in such a vehicle. She supposed there had been hired, chauffeur-drawn limousines at her parents' funerals, but she had not attended those funerals; had no memory of anything connected with them, except the strange behavior of her grandmother, her Aunt Lora, and other

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adults—their grief, but, underlying that grief, their air of profound and speechless shock.

Where is Mommy, she'd asked, where is Daddy, and the replies were always the same: Gone away.

And crying did no good. And fury did no good. Nothing little Sybil could do, or say, or think did any good. That was the first lesson, maybe.

But Daddy isn't dead, you know he isn't. You know, and he knows, why he has returned.

10. "Possessed"

Aunt Lora was smoking again!—back to two packs a day. And Sybil understood guiltily that she was to blame.

For there was the matter of the kidskin bag. The secret gift. Which Sybil had hidden in the farthest corner of her closet, wrapped in plastic, so the smell of it would not permeate the room. (Still, you could smell it—couldn't you? A subtle pervasive smell, rich as any perfume?) Sybil lived in dread that her aunt would discover the purse, and the money; though Lora Dell Blake never entered her niece's room without an invitation, somehow, Sybil worried, it *might* happen. She had never kept any important secret from her aunt in her life, and this secret both filled her with a sense of excitement and power, and weakened her, in childish dread.

What most concerned Lora, however, was Sybil's renewed interest in *that*—as in, "Oh, honey, are you thinking about *that* again? *Why?*"

That was the abbreviated euphemism for what Lora might more fully call "the accident"—"the tragedy"—"your parents' deaths."

Sybil, who had never shown more than passing curiosity about *that* in the past, as far as Lora could remember, was now in the grip of what Lora called "morbid curiosity." That mute, perplexed look in her eyes! That tremulous, though sometimes a bit sullen, look to her mouth! One evening, lighting up a cigarette with shaking fingers, Lora said, bluntly, "Sybil, honey, this tears my heart out. What *is* it you want to know?"

Sybil said, as if she'd been waiting for just this question, "Is my father alive?"

"What?"

"My father. George Conte. *Is* he—maybe—alive?"

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The question hovered between them, and, for a long pained moment, it seemed almost that Aunt Lora might snort in exasperation, jump up from the table, walk out of the room. But then she said, shaking her head adamantly, dropping her gaze from Sybil's, "Honey, no. The man is not alive." She paused. She smoked her cigarette, exhaled smoke vigorously through her nostrils; seemed about to say something further; changed her mind; then said, quietly, "You don't ask about your mother, Sybil. Why is that?"

"I—believe that my mother is dead. But—"

"But—?"

"My—my father—"

"—isn't?"

Sybil said, stammering, her cheeks growing hot, "I just want to *know*. I want to see a, a—grave! A death certificate!"

"I'll send to Wellington for a copy of the death certificate," Aunt Lora said slowly. "Will that do?"

"You don't have a copy here?"

"Honey, why would I have a copy here?"

Sybil saw that the older woman was regarding her with a look of pity, and something like dread. She said, stammering, her cheeks warm, "In your—legal things. Your papers. Locked away—"

"Honey, no."

There was a pause. Then Sybil said, half-sobbing, "I was too young to go to their funeral. So I never saw. Whatever it was—I never *saw*. Is that it? They say that's the reason for the ritual—for displaying the dead."

Aunt Lora reached over to take Sybil's hand. "It's one of the reasons, honey," she said. "We meet up with it all the time, at the medical center. People don't believe that loved ones are dead—they know, but can't accept it; the shock is just too much to absorb at once. And, yes, it's a theory, that if you don't see a person actually dead—if there isn't a public ceremony to define it—you may have difficulty accepting it. You may—" and here Aunt Lora paused, frowning, "—be susceptible to fantasy."

Fantasy! Sybil stared at her aunt, shocked. *But I've seen him, I know. I believe him and not you!*

The subject seemed to be concluded for the time being. Aunt Lora briskly stubbed out her cigarette and said, "I'm to blame—probably. I'd been in therapy for a couple of years after it happened and I just didn't want to talk about it any longer, so when you'd asked me questions, over the years, I cut you off; I realize that. But, you see,

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there's so little to say—Melanie is dead, and *he* is dead. And it all happened a long time ago."

That evening, Sybil was reading in a book on memory she'd taken out of the Glencoe Public Library: *It is known that human beings are "possessed" by an unfathomable number of dormant memory-traces, of which some can be activated under special conditions, including excitation by stimulating points in the cortex. Such traces are indelibly imprinted in the nervous system and are commonly activated by mnemonic stimuli—words, sights, sounds, and especially smells. The phenomenon of déjà vu is closely related to these experiences, in which a "doubling of consciousness" occurs, with the conviction that one has lived an experience before. Much of human memory, however, includes subsequent revision, selection, and fantasizing. . . .*

Sybil let the book shut. She contemplated, for the dozenth time, the faint red marks on her wrist, where Mr. Starr—the man who called himself Mr. Starr—had gripped her, without knowing his own strength.

Nor had Sybil been aware, at the time, that his fingers were so strong; and had clasped so tightly around her wrist.

11. "Mr. Starr"—or "Mr. Conte"

She saw him, and saw that he was waiting for her. And her impulse was to run immediately to him, and observe, with childish delight, how the sight of her would illuminate his face. *Here! Here I am!* It was a profound power that seemed to reside in her, Sybil Blake, seventeen years old—the power to have such an effect upon a man whom she scarcely knew, and who did not know her.

Because he loves me. Because he's my father. That's why.

And if he isn't my father—

It was late afternoon of a dull, overcast day. Still, the park was populated at this end; joggers were running, some in colorful costumes. Sybil was not among them, she'd slept poorly the previous night, thinking of—what? Her dead mother who'd been so beautiful?—her father whose face she could not recall (though, yes surely, it was imprinted deep, deep in the cells of her memory)?—her Aunt Lora who was, or was not, telling her the truth, and who loved her more than anyone on earth? And Mr. Starr of course.

Or Mr. Conte.

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Sybil was hidden from Mr. Starr's gaze as, with an air of smiling expectancy, he looked about. He was carrying his duffel bag and leaning on his cane. He wore his plain, dark clothes; he was bareheaded, and his silvery hair shone; if Sybil were closer, she would see light winking in his dark glasses. She had noticed the limousine, parked up on the Boulevard a block away.

A young woman jogger ran past Mr. Starr, long-legged, hair flying, and he looked at her, intently—watched her as she ran out of sight along the path. Then he turned back, glancing up toward the street, shifting his shoulders impatiently. Sybil saw him check his wristwatch.

Waiting for you. You know why.

And then, suddenly—Sybil decided not to go to Mr. Starr after all. The man who called himself Starr. She changed her mind at the last moment, unprepared for her decision except to understand that, as, quickly, she walked away, it must be the right decision: her heart was beating erratically, all her senses alert, as if she had narrowly escaped great danger.

12. The Fate of "George Conte"

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays Lora Dell Blake attended an aerobics class after work, and on these evenings she rarely returned home before seven o'clock. Today was a Friday, at four: Sybil calculated she had more than enough time to search out her aunt's private papers, and to put everything back in order, well before her aunt came home.

Aunt Lora's household keys were kept in a top drawer of her desk, and one of these keys, Sybil knew, was to a small aluminum filing cabinet beside the desk, where confidential records and papers were kept. There were perhaps a dozen keys, in a jumble, but Sybil had no difficulty finding the right one. "Aunt Lora, please forgive me," she whispered. It was a measure of her aunt's trust of her that the filing cabinet was so readily unlocked.

For never in her life had Sybil Blake done such a thing, in violation of the trust between herself and her aunt. She sensed that, unlocking the cabinet, opening the sliding drawers, she might be committing an irrevocable act.

The drawer was jammed tight with manila folders, most of them well-worn and dog-eared. Sybil's first response was disappoint-

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ment—there were hundreds of household receipts, financial statements, Internal Revenue records dating back for years. Then she discovered a packet of letters dating back to the 1950s, when Aunt Lora would have been a young girl. There were a few snapshots, a few formally posed photographs—one of a strikingly beautiful, if immature-looking, girl in a high-school graduation cap and gown, smiling at the camera with glossy lips. On the rear was written "Melanie, 1969." Sybil stared at this likeness of her mother—her mother long before she'd become her mother—and felt both triumph and dismay: for, yes, here was the mysterious Melanie, and, yet, *was* this the Melanie the child knew?—or, simply, a high school girl, Sybil's own approximate age, the kind who, judging from her looks and self-absorbed expression, would never have been a friend of Sybil's?

Sybil put the photograph back, with trembling fingers. She was half grateful that Aunt Lora had kept so few mementos of the past—there could be fewer shocks, revelations.

No photographs of the wedding of Melanie Blake and George Conte. Not a one.

No photographs, so far as Sybil could see, of her father "George Conte" at all.

There was a single snapshot of Melanie with her baby daughter Sybil, and this Sybil studied for a long time. It had been taken in summer, at a lakeside cottage; Melanie was posing prettily, in a white dress, with her baby snug in the crook of her arm, and both were looking toward the camera, as if someone had just called out to them, to make them laugh—Melanie with a wide, glamorous, yet sweet smile, little Sybil gaping open-mouthed. Here Melanie looked only slightly more mature than in the graduation photograph: her pale brown hair, many shades of brown and blond, was shoulder-length, and upturned; her eyes were meticulously outlined in mascara, prominent in her heart-shaped face.

In the foreground, on the grass, was the shadow of a man's head and shoulders—George Conte, perhaps? The missing person.

Sybil stared at this snapshot, which was wrinkled and dog-eared. She did not know what to think, and, oddly, she felt very little: for was the infant in the picture really herself, Sybil Blake, if she could not remember?

Or did she in fact remember, somewhere deep in her brain, in memory-traces that were indelible?

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From now on, she would "remember" her mother as the pretty, self-assured young woman in this snapshot. This image, in full color, would replace any other.

Reluctantly, Sybil slid the snapshot back in its packet. How she would have liked to keep it!—but Aunt Lora would discover the theft, eventually. And Aunt Lora must be protected against knowing that her own niece had broken into her things, violated the trust between them.

The folders containing personal material were few, and quickly searched. Nothing pertaining to the accident, the "tragedy"?—not even an obituary? Sybil looked in adjacent files, with increasing desperation. There was not only the question of who her father was, or had been, but the question, nearly as compelling, of why Aunt Lora had eradicated all trace of him, even in her own private files. For a moment Sybil wondered if there had ever been any "George Conte" at all: maybe her mother had not married, and that was part of the secret? Melanie had died in some terrible way, terrible at least in Lora Dell Blake's eyes, thus the very fact must be hidden from Sybil, after so many years? Sybil recalled Aunt Lora saying, earnestly, a few years ago, "The only thing you should know, Sybil, is that your mother—and your father—would not want you to grow up in the shadow of their deaths. They would have wanted you—your mother especially—to be *happy.*"

Part of this legacy of happiness, Sybil gathered, had been for her to grow up as a perfectly normal American girl, in a sunny, shadowless place with no history, or, at any rate, no history that concerned her. "But I don't want to be *happy*, I want to *know,*" Sybil said aloud.

But the rest of the manila files, jammed so tightly together they were almost inextricable, yielded nothing.

So, disappointed, Sybil shut the file drawer, and locked it.

But what of Aunt Lora's desk drawers? She had a memory of their being unlocked, thus surely containing nothing of significance; but now it occurred to her that, being unlocked, one of these drawers might in fact contain something Aunt Lora might want to keep safely hidden. So, quickly, with not much hope, Sybil looked through these drawers, messy, jammed with papers, clippings, further packets of household receipts, old programs from plays they'd seen in Los Angeles—and, in the largest drawer, at the very bottom, in a wrinkled manila envelope with "MEDICAL INSURANCE" carefully printed on its front, Sybil found what she was looking for.

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Newspaper clippings, badly yellowed, some of them spliced together with aged cellophane tape—

WELLINGTON, VT. MAN SHOOTS WIFE, SELF
SUICIDE ATTEMPT FAILS

AREA MAN KILLS WIFE IN JULY 4 QUARREL
ATTEMPTS SUICIDE ON LAKE CHAMPLAIN

GEORGE CONTE, 31, ARRESTED FOR MURDER
WELLINGTON LAWYER HELD IN SHOOTING DEATH OF WIFE, 26

CONTE TRIAL BEGINS
PROSECUTION CHARGES PREMEDITATION
Family Members Testify

So Sybil Blake learned, in the space of less than sixty seconds, the nature of the tragedy from which her Aunt Lora had shielded her for nearly fifteen years.

Her father was indeed a man named George Conte, and this man had shot her mother Melanie to death, in their speedboat on Lake Champlain, and pushed her body overboard. He had tried to kill himself too but had only critically wounded himself with a shot to the head. He'd undergone emergency neurosurgery, and recovered; he was arrested, tried, and convicted of second-degree murder; and sentenced to between twelve and nineteen years in prison, at the Hartshill State Prison in northern Vermont.

Sybil sifted through the clippings, her fingers numb. So this was it! This! Murder, attempted suicide!—not mere drunkenness and an "accident" on the lake.

Aunt Lora seemed to have stuffed the clippings in an envelope in haste, or in revulsion; with some, photographs had been torn off, leaving only their captions—"Melanie and George Conte, 1975," "Prosecution witness Lora Dell Blake leaving courthouse." Those photographs of George Conte showed a man who surely did resemble "Mr. Starr": younger, dark-haired, with a face heavier in the jaws and an air of youthful self-assurance and expectation. *There. Your father. "Mr. Starr." The missing person.*

There were several photographs too of Melanie Conte, including one taken for her high-school yearbook, and one of her in a long,

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formal gown with her hair glamorously upswept—"Wellington woman killed by jealous husband." There was a wedding photograph of the couple looking very young, attractive, and happy; a photograph of the "Conte family at their summer home"; a photograph of "George Conte, lawyer, after 2nd-degree murder verdict"—the convicted man, stunned, down-looking, being taken away handcuffed between two grim sheriff's men. Sybil understood that the terrible thing that had happened in her family had been of enormous public interest in Wellington, Vermont, and that this was part of its terribleness, its shame.

What had Aunt Lora said?—she'd been in therapy for some time afterward, thus did not want to relive those memories.

And she'd said, *It all happened a long time ago.*

But she'd lied, too. She had looked Sybil full in the face and lied, lied. Insisting that Sybil's father was dead when she knew he was alive.

When Sybil herself had reason to believe he was alive.

My name is Starr! Don't judge me too quickly!

Sybil read, and reread, the aged clippings. There were perhaps twenty of them. She gathered two general things: that her father George Conte was from a locally prominent family, and that he'd had a very capable attorney to defend him at his trial; and that the community had greatly enjoyed the scandal, though, no doubt, offering condolences to the grieving Blake family. The spectacle of a beautiful young wife murdered by her "jealous" young husband, her body pushed from an expensive speedboat to sink in Lake Champlain—who could resist? The media had surely exploited this tragedy to its fullest.

Now you see, don't you, why your name had to be changed. Not "Conte," the murderer, but "Blake," the victim, is your parent.

Sybil was filled with a child's rage, a child's inarticulate grief—Why, why! This man named George Conte had, by a violent act, ruined everything!

According to the testimony of witnesses, George Conte had been "irrationally" jealous of his wife's friendship with other men in their social circle; he'd quarreled publicly with her upon several occasions, and was known to have a drinking problem. On the afternoon of July Fourth, the day of the murder, the couple had been drinking with friends at the Lake Champlain Club for much of the afternoon, and had then set out in their boat for their summer home, three

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miles to the south. Midway, a quarrel erupted, and George Conte shot his wife several times with a .32 caliber revolver, which, he later confessed, he'd acquired for the purpose of "showing her I was serious." He then pushed her body overboard, and continued on to the cottage where, in a "distraught state," he tried to take his two-year-old daughter Sybil with him, back to the boat—saying that her mother was waiting for her. But the child's grandmother and aunt, both relatives of the murdered woman, prevented him from taking her, so he returned to the boat alone, took it out a considerable distance onto the lake, and shot himself in the head. He collapsed in the idling boat, and was rescued by an emergency medical team and taken to a hospital in Burlington where his life was saved.

Why, why did they save *his* life?—Sybil thought bitterly. She'd never felt such emotion, such outrage, as she felt for this person George Conte: "Mr. Starr." He'd wanted to kill her too, of course—that was the purpose of his coming home, wanting to get her, saying her mother wanted her. Had Sybil's grandmother and Aunt Lora not stopped him, he would have shot her too, and dumped her body into the lake, and ended it all by shooting himself—but not killing himself. A bungled suicide. And then, after recovering, a plea of "not guilty" to the charge of murder.

A charge of second-degree murder, and a sentence of only twelve to nineteen years. So, he was out. George Conte was out. As "Mr. Starr," the amateur artist, the lover of the beautiful and the pure, he'd found her out, and he'd come for her.

And you know why.

13. "Your Mother Is Waiting For You"

Sybil Blake returned the clippings to the envelope so conspicuously marked "MEDICAL INSURANCE," and returned the envelope to the very bottom of the unlocked drawer in her aunt's desk. She closed the drawer carefully, and, though she was in an agitated state, looked about the room to see if she'd left anything inadvertently out of place; any evidence that she'd been in here at all.

Yes, she'd violated the trust Aunt Lora had had in her. Yet Aunt Lora had lied to her too, these many years. And so convincingly.

Sybil understood that she could never again believe anyone fully. She understood that those who love us can, and will, lie to us; they

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may act out of a moral conviction that such lying is necessary, and this may in fact be true—but, still, they *lie*.

Even as they look into your eyes and insist they are telling the truth.

Of the reasonable steps Sybil Blake might have taken, this was the most reasonable: she might have confronted Lora Dell Blake with the evidence she'd found and with her knowledge of what the tragedy had been, and she might have told her about "Mr. Starr."

But she hated him so. And Aunt Lora hated him. And, hating him as they did, how could they protect themselves against him, if he chose to act? For Sybil had no doubt, now, her father had returned to her to do her harm.

If George Conte had served his prison term, and been released from prison, if he was free to move about the country like any other citizen, certainly he had every right to come to Glencoe, California. In approaching Sybil Blake, his daughter, he had committed no crime. He had not threatened her, he had not harassed her, he had behaved in a kindly, courteous, generous way; except for the fact (in Aunt Lora's eyes this would be an outrageous, unspeakable fact) that he had misrepresented himself.

"Mr. Starr" was a lie, an obscenity. But no one had forced Sybil to model for him, nor to accept an expensive gift from him. She had done so willingly. She had done so gratefully. After her initial timidity, she'd been rather eager to be so employed.

For "Mr. Starr" had seduced her—almost.

Sybil reasoned that if she told her aunt about "Mr. Starr," their lives would be irrevocably changed. Aunt Lora would be upset to the point of hysteria. She would insist upon going to the police. The police would rebuff her, or, worse yet, humor her. And what if Aunt Lora went to confront "Mr. Starr" herself?

No, Sybil was not going to involve her aunt. Nor implicate her in any way.

"I love you too much," Sybil whispered. "You are all I have."

To avoid seeing Aunt Lora that evening, or, rather, to avoid being seen by her, Sybil went to bed early, leaving a note on the kitchen table explaining that she had a mild case of the flu. Next morning, when Aunt Lora looked in Sybil's room, to ask her worriedly how she was, Sybil smiled wanly and said she'd improved; but, still, she thought she would stay home from school that day.

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Aunt Lora, ever vigilant against illness, pressed her hand against Sybil's forehead, which did seem feverish. She looked into Sybil's eyes, which were dilated. She asked if Sybil had a sore throat, if she had a headache, if she'd had an upset stomach or diarrhea, and Sybil said no, no, she simply felt a little weak, she wanted to sleep. So Aunt Lora believed her, brought her Bufferin and fruit juice and toast with honey, and went off quietly to leave her alone.

Sybil wondered if she would ever see her aunt again.

But of course she would: she had no doubt, she could force herself to do what must be done.

Wasn't her mother waiting for her?

A windy, chilly afternoon. Sybil wore warm slacks and a wool pullover sweater and her jogging shoes. But she wasn't running today. She carried her kidskin bag, its strap looped over her shoulder.

Her handsome kidskin bag, with its distinctive smell.

Her bag, into which she'd slipped, before leaving home, the sharpest of her aunt's several finely honed steak knives.

Sybil Blake hadn't gone to school that day but she entered the park at approximately three-forty-five, her usual time. She'd sighted Mr. Starr's long elegantly gleaming black limousine parked on the street close by, and there was Mr. Starr himself, waiting for her.

How animated he became, seeing her!—exactly as he'd been in the past. It seemed strange to Sybil that, somehow, to him, things were unchanged.

He imagined her still ignorant, innocent. Easy prey.

Smiling at her. Waving. "Hello, Sybil!"

Daring to call her that—"Sybil."

He was hurrying in her direction, limping, using his cane. Sybil smiled. There was no reason not to smile, thus she smiled. She was thinking with what skill Mr. Starr used that cane of his, how practiced he'd become. Since the injury to his brain?—or had there been another injury, suffered in prison?

Those years in prison, when he'd had time to think. Not to repent—Sybil seemed to know he had not repented—but, simply, to think.

To consider the mistakes he'd made, and how to unmake them.

"Why, my dear, hello!—I've missed you, you know," Mr. Starr said. There was an edge of reproach to his voice but he smiled to

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show his delight. "I won't ask where *were* you, now you're *here*. And carrying your beautiful bag—"

Sybil peered up at Mr. Starr's pale, tense, smiling face. Her reactions were slow at first, as if numbed; as if she were, for all that she'd rehearsed this, not fully wakened—a kind of sleepwalker.

"And—you *will* model for me this afternoon? Under our new, improved terms?"

"Yes, Mr. Starr."

Mr. Starr had his duffel bag, his sketch pad, his charcoal sticks. He was bareheaded, and his fine silver hair blew in the wind. He wore a slightly soiled white shirt with a navy-blue silk necktie and his old tweed jacket; and his gleaming black shoes that put Sybil in mind of a funeral. She could not see his eyes behind the dark lenses of his glasses but she knew by the puckered skin at the corners of his eyes that he was staring at her intently, hungrily. She was his model, he was the artist, when could they begin? Already, his fingers were flexing in anticipation.

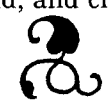
"I think, though, we've about exhausted the possibilities of this park, don't you, dear? It's charming, but rather common. And so *finite,*" Mr. Starr was saying, expansively. "Even the beach, here in Glencoe. Somehow it lacks—amplitude. So I was thinking—I was hoping—we might today vary our routine just a bit, and drive up the coast. Not far—just a few miles. Away from so many people, and so many distractions." Seeing that Sybil was slow to respond, he added, warmly, "I'll pay you double, Sybil—of course. You know you can trust me by now, don't you? Yes?"

That curious, ugly little hook of a scar in Mr. Starr's forehead—its soft pale tissue gleamed in the whitish light. Sybil wondered was that where the bullet had gone in.

Mr. Starr had been leading Sybil in the direction of the curb, where the limousine was waiting, its engine idling almost soundlessly. He opened the door. Sybil, clutching her kidskin bag, peered inside, at the cushioned, shadowy interior. For a moment, her mind was blank. She might have been on a high board, about to dive into the water, not knowing how she'd gotten to where she was, or why. Only that she could not turn back.

Mr. Starr was smiling eagerly, hopefully. "Shall we? Sybil?"

"Yes, Mr. Starr," Sybil said, and climbed inside.



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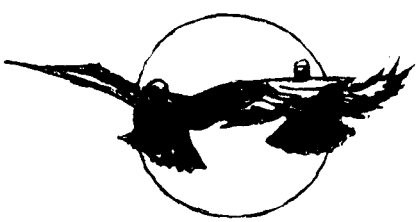
ON OUR COVER

Joyce Carol Oates's writing is distinguished by exceptional range and depth and a fearlessness in experimentation that few writers have approached. Yet she has not always been understood by critics, as she explained in a recent interview with the *New York Times:* "I write about the victims of violence . . . and yet my critics say I'm writing about violence. From my point of view, I've always been writing about its aftermath."

In many of her stories, concern for the victim translates into a powerful identification with women and children, but she never fails to attend to the subleties of a situation, or to depict those aspects of the victim's own character that contribute to the tragedy. Perhaps this is what makes her fiction always vibrant and compelling, whatever the theme.

Since the publication of her first collection of stories in 1963 *(By the North Gate)*, Joyce Carol Oates has been a major voice in American fiction. She has twenty novels, and dozens of stories and novellas to her credit; works which have earned her a National Book Award, three O. Henry awards, the O. Henry Special Award for Continuing Achievement, a Guggenheim Foundation award, and the Rea Award for the Short Story. Her most recent novel, *Blackwater,* loosely based on the 1969 accident at Chappaquiddick, is available from E.P. Dutton. Said Andrew Vachss in the *Chicago Tribune:* "For some of us (*Blackwater*) will signal another frontier opened by the sword of a master storyteller."

Ms. Oates was born in Lockport, New York and educated at Syracuse University and the University of Wisconsin. She lives with her husband in Princeton, New Jersey, where she is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University.



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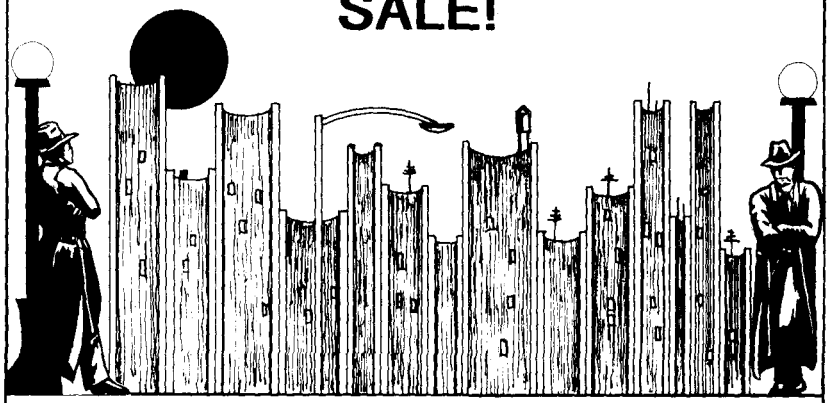

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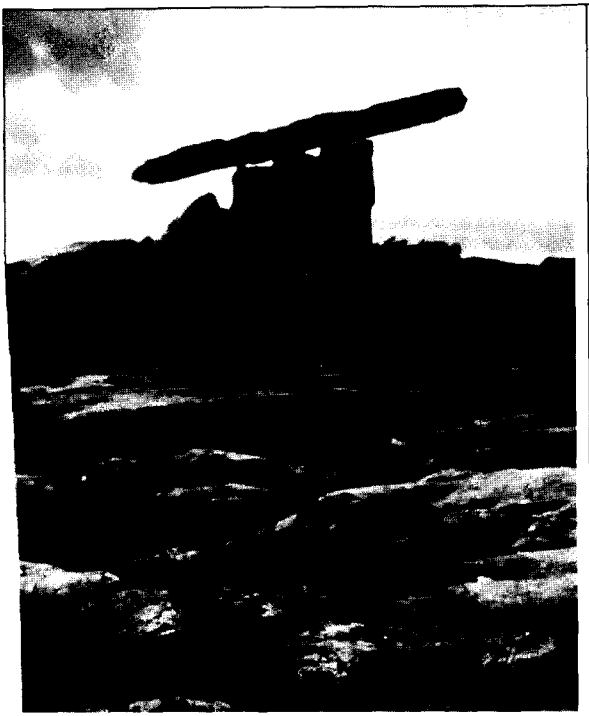

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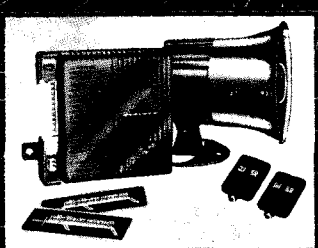

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